

MISSION MILK LAUNCH SPEECH by Ruth Bond, NFWI Chair
16 November 2010

Good morning.

Many of you will know of the WI's long standing commitment to farming and community sustainability. While much of our growth is now in more urban areas our roots are firmly in the countryside and our members – all 207,000 of them - continue to support British food and farming with a passion, which is why it gives me great pleasure to be here today.

Today's event reignites a partnership that began in 2007 when the NFU and the WI first joined forces to highlight the unfair prices that dairy farmers were being paid for their milk and labour.

Three years ago we held a series of 100 debates – the Great Milk Debates, which drew attention to the critical situation facing British farmers. More than 15,000 individuals took part in the debates which were set against a backdrop of high exit rates from the industry and low prices paid to farmers.

As well as drawing attention to this situation the debates also informed consumers about the importance of the UK's dairy farms.

Many people do not think about how the dairy sector affects them;

- about the jobs it offers;
- the food it produces;
- the rural landscapes it shapes;
- and the stewardship that our farmers provide.

Many local businesses rely on dairy farmers. When farmers economise, or go out of business it has a knock on effect which while often overlooked, really challenges the viability of local economies.

And when farmers cut costs there are repercussions throughout the countryside; they stop investing in their land, in their businesses, in new technology and equipment. If farmers cannot reinvest when markets are healthy this poses real risks for long term productivity. And again we see the knock on effect in terms of sustainability.

The Great Milk Debates brought these issues to the forefront of public debate.

There has undoubtedly been progress in the years since. We have seen the development of dedicated relationships between retailers and dairy farmers; real commitments to long terms partnerships.

And this year's DairyCo Farmer Intentions Survey highlighted an improvement in confidence levels.

Yet challenges remain.

Farmgate prices remain at a low level, despite improving market conditions. And we know that farmers' share of the retail price of milk and cheddar cheese has fallen in the past year.

And while the dedicated relationships are an important step forwards we see a growing split between those fortunate enough to obtain retail contracts and the majority who cannot.

This situation presents a real set of risks that we cannot be complacent about – from industry exit rates, to production rates, investment and loss of skills – these are many of the challenges that the WI and the NFU first explored in the Great Milk Debates.

Added to this, for consumers of British dairy products, concerned about quality assurance standards, welfare, food security and food miles, the situation could ultimately lead to less choice on our supermarket shelves.

So what can be done?

We want to see those retailers that have not yet stepped up to the challenge begin to take more responsibility for their farmer suppliers by establishing a dedicated pool, with a fair and transparent pricing model.

And not all dairy products are sold on supermarket shelves. There is scope for other large retailers of milk and dairy products to step up to this challenge too and play their part in ensuring the dairy industry's survival.

We are also calling on retailers to expand their dedicated relationships with the liquid milk sector into the cheese market too.

And of course as the largest women's organisation in the UK, the WI has a certain amount of strength in terms of our ability to affect change through purchasing power too.

We know our members care about the provenance of their purchases and I will be calling on WIs up and down the country to continue to support our dairy farmers with their shopping baskets too.

Our dairy industry is one to be proud of; with high welfare standards and a custodianship role over our beautiful countryside. This is not a case of wistful yearning. There is a growing demand for British, local, quality, assured and traceable food; for products that consumers can trust and support. And we all have a responsibility to ensure a profitable and sustainable British dairy industry is in place to meet this demand.

Thank you.