ResULTS project: case study C, interview 209

Face to face interview with agricultural industry, conducted 11/3/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

R …then when you add into it the average age of a crofter or a farmer is even more terrifying. These people are on worse than the agricultural minimum wage and the majority of them are over 65, what’s the future for our food industry, and our environmental management industry if you’re looking down the barrel of that?

I This is trying to capture, this is about resilience of food systems. We’re trying to look at that whole thing, looking at trade-offs and pinch points and trying to understand those.

R I’m already completely on-board. There was another project that I went to a workshop last year which was [inaudible] James Hutton Institute, and that was Salsa. They had a specific workshop in Fort William, so there were people from Argyll, Lochaber, myself from [inaudible], and that was all about the barriers and such like.

I I was talking to one of the postdocs who was working on that, but they weren’t willing to share anything until they’ve published everything.

R It would be easier if we all worked together. Certainly that workshop was really interesting in terms of, there weren’t any numbers as such against it, there weren’t facts and figures and profit and loss etc, but it was a very good informative workshop in terms of what it should produce as an output in terms of what’s good, what’s bad, what’s holding it back, what could it be.

I Anything that struck you particularly?

R Abattoirs seem to be absolutely critical, alongside cutting plants. The cutting plants [inaudible] because there are probably too few abattoirs. The guys on Shetland were telling me basically just having an abattoir there isn’t enough, if you want it to actually become self-sustaining it must have a cutting plant and a marketing tool that the abattoir group are in control of. Because that’s where the money is, the money isn’t in killing animals. I just mean in terms of keeping it going, that chap’s opinion was if you could cut the carcasses and then sell them on, that’s where you could have funds to make sure you pay for the facility, maintain it, staff it and such like.

I Are you involved in the plans for the abattoir?

R I am at arm’s length but I’m trying to be. I’m just in too many different things now, so I don’t have time for it. One of my friends is part of it, he sent me an update last night but I haven’t read it yet, I don’t know what stage it’s at. That seems to be a big factor, and one of the… Distance to markets and things like that, difficulty in setting up local supply chains, education of the public in terms of how food is produced and why buying local is better. It sounds ridiculous to me the growing up I had but apparently that’s the way it is for the majority of the population, they have no real idea of how food’s made or killed or produced, or why you shouldn’t buy [inaudible] fed beef from USA that is about to come in the UK by the sounds of things.

It seems like a no-brainer to me all of that stuff but not enough education in schools so people aren’t as aware and maybe respectful of it. There was other stuff as well, like new entrants was a bit of a barrier, the cost of turning scrub croft or farmland [inaudible] productive in whatever you’re doing with that land, whether it’s a polytunnel, bees or whatever it might be, there’s a great deal of infrastructure cost to get it productive again, and far too much derelict land.

I What does resilience mean to you?

R It’s kind of a modern term, a bit like sustainability. In general, crofting as a sector is bloody resilient, if you think of everything that a crofter has been through in the last 250-300 years I think it’s unbelievable that we still have a crofting sector. I’m not sure at an individual level whether there needs to be any more resilience, as an industry I guess what resilience would mean more options. That’s the main thing I think of these days is if all I’m doing, all the different things I’m involved in is create an extra option for someone, with a different route to follow and possibly less reliance on subsidy, then I would be happy.

I think at the moment it’s quite narrow for a lot of people. The majority of crofters probably they’re doing the same thing that their grandfathers and grandmothers did, and I respect that element of crofting but the one thing that strikes me about crofting is that it’s always been changing, it’s always needed to adopt new technologies and different ways of doing things but I think too many people are stuck in that rut of you need to defend the land against landlords in case they clear us all off it again.

I Is that a serious concern?

R I think it’s just an underlying mood. Some people are very protective of all of that side of it, other crofters I know, members that I have would prefer that the term crofting didn’t exist, that there is an associated crofting tenure [inaudible] agricultural land, and just had landlord and tenant arrangements. It’s a difficult thing, history releases sometimes from other organisations seem to take a generic stance on crofting, and I just don’t know how you can. I didn’t really understand it until I started working here and going to different areas, it’s unbelievably different in the way that people think about it that trying to put it in one box I find impossible.

Crofters on [area D] are a completely different setup than anything you would see here, the way they think about things on Lewis and Harris is totally different to [area C]. What they’re able to do on Uist with their crofts is far different than almost anywhere else, Shetland is a completely different process as well, every area seems to do it in a slightly different way. I guess resilience would be creating options to make sure that we try and at least retain the same kind of numbers that we have right now by giving people different opportunities within their land.

I Have you got some ideas about options?

R There are a couple of different things we’re working on at the moment. Obviously the sea eagle stuff, for some people it’s having a serious effect, a very serious effect to the point where we have lost flocks off hills, we have got abandoned hillside [inaudible] and such like. That’s probably one element, to try and persuade people to keep sheep on these hills and find ways to support them to do it, because if the land goes out of use it takes years and years to bring it back into use again. The main other element I reckon is trying to create, maintain and have a function [naudible] supply chain here. Tourism is tremendously important to the area, it’s a massive driver of growth but there’s no local food.

Realistically, given the area of land that [area C] has, there’s nowhere near enough local food available, and it’s quite difficult for people to find. It seems crazy to me that they’ll be buying stuff from the Co-op or whatever that might be UK based, it might be Scottish, it’s probably very unlikely to ever have seen this area. The real opportunity there I think to improve tourist experience here is buying wonderful food, and buying it locally which the majority want to come here and do. And also try and use that added value in the crofts and farms who are supplying that meat to make them a bit more sufficient. From what we’ve looked at people are able to get to the point where they can sell meat, or sell a carcass rather than selling store which is predominantly what happens here. There’s a massive uplift in terms of available profit, and that’s even without a local abattoir.

We’re just registering a new firm for the area, we’ve employed funding to get a project officer to create a business plan. Basically we would have crofters and farmers as members of this limited firm, pay a levy or whatever, and then the same with restaurants, bars, pubs, cafes, all the rest of it on the other end, where the firm’s job would be to organise who wants what meat when and who has what meat available. So to coordinate all of that, so the crofter and the farmer in terms of producing things just has to focus on high health, high quality livestock and doesn’t have to think about, am I selling too low a price, am I getting [inaudible] paying for it. And the end user, in terms of the café, shop, restaurant, pub or whatever just has to focus on again to make sure I sell [inaudible] Foods Limited, which should be the name of it, I want this regularly. And we’d brand it the same so that we’d use a group selling and group buying ethos so if someone doesn’t have mutton we can get it from somewhere else and it’s all called [inaudible] mutton.

I So this is linked to the [inaudible] Mutton project?

R Yes, it’s on the back of that. We did a fair bit of that and this is the next evolution of it, which is to take that to the next stage we need someone to work on it, we need someone at least half a week putting in the hours, driving it forward, getting the orders and setting it up.

I Do you see that there are enough people who can finish stock?

R Definitely. Even when you consider, even if every crofter and farmer only put in 5% of their flock or something like that, because that’s what they view as I’m going to get my basic support here and I work offshore or whatever so that income coming in. Then if I sell bees every year, that’s how much I’m going to get from there. I don’t think everyone will do it but I think the ones that do will probably get a lot of it and be able to…

What we’re aiming to do to start with is mutton because I don’t think there’s a great deal of finishing to be involved there, as long as they have good livestock managing standards and such like, I can’t see that, you’re not going to want to put a load of fat on it, it just needs to be a good quality animal that’s had decent access to a bit of grass, a bit of heather. We’ve got a fair bit of draff on the island so there’s always the potential of feeding sheep that as well. But there are those who have already finished cattle and lambs and things like that, so this firm would be focused on more than that to provide that service.

So if we can get [inaudible] lambs, we can get [inaudible] beef, we can get [inaudible] pork, they would do that but that comes back to that options. I feel if we can get to the point where we can pilot options and show how they work, and share that with people then I feel that’s a way of trying to build resilience in the area.

I You mentioned different crofting systems in different places, is there something unique about [area C] you think…

R The main thing is [area C] tourism. Crofting typically has had such a low amount of money associated with it, people don’t tend to make much money so there’s two ways that folk have followed, one is decrofting and settling for house sites, which has become a real commodity and a real price involved, that could be a holiday home that someone can make huge amounts of money from. The other side of things is crofting’s getting bigger, so that they have enough to run a reasonable sized flock, or made themselves full-time. But for the area those people are critical really because they’re sort of keeping the numbers up, they’ve got the equipment and such like and they’re helping other people in their area and they’ve got a bigger area of land so they’ve got more livestock on whatever common grazings they might have, so that grazing system is supported a bit more.

I think it’s those two routes really that probably make it slightly different, we have far more decrofting, a huge amount of more house sites. Land is used far more in that way here than anything else. Then you have people at other areas, certain areas of crofting don’t like these, they call them super crofters or whatever. As far as I’m concerned, if someone’s using the land and they’re producing it and they’re doing it in a good way, who cares if someone’s got two crofts or 200 crofts. The worse thing that seems to be for crofting is people who’ve come in and fritter off again, they build a house and realise they can’t live in the area because they don’t like the winter or midges.

I Do you have a lot of incomers coming in and not staying then?

R Yes, generally in between, they cause a huge amount of problems because they take the land off crofting use and do this that and the other and then you just have abandoned land. You can see when you drive around anywhere on [inaudible] unfortunately. I think that’s the main difference seems to be that. You can’t blame people in some ways in terms of the decrofting selling for house sites because someone has been working all their lives at this and want to have something to retire on, what else are they going to do, they’ve been living… For crofters probably half the agricultural minimum wage if that, quite a few of them will see they don’t make any profit on a croft, any year, they do it borne out of the sheer love of it. That’s why I want to get into it, I don’t want to make money, I want [inaudible].

I think responsibly managed livestock on land is one of the best uses land can be put to. Responsibly, thinking about it, putting stuff back into the land again, not just taking all the grass off it and then wondering why you don’t have the grass. It’s a bit of a funny area, it’s kind of self-sabotage in a way. It’s the same for the tourism businesses as well, [inaudible]’s never far from the press one way or another, you wonder what’s going on in the rest of the world if they keep paying attention to us.

I You see tourism as being a stable continuing…

R I don’t think it’s ever going to go, [inaudible]’s been one of the most beautiful places to visit in Scotland for a long time and I can’t see that’s ever going to change, in terms of the numbers and such like. My big worry is that people start viewing the area in a negative way because of the products that we’re producing as an island, and by product I mean what the landscape looks like, is there toilets, is there car parking, what’s the infrastructure like, do you have access to local food, is the accommodation typically good or is it kind of someone’s garage just letting it out because they can. My real worry is that we get that kind of impact. It’s never going to go away because people will always want to come here I think. Yes, the tourism side of things is big for me as well, I’m also a director of [organisation 1] which is the [inaudible] for the area, so I’m on that so I can try and bring this kind of voice in there as well. I just think the land managers are so important.

I One of the things that interest me is how many hats people wear. There’s a few people who have lots of them, how sustainable is that?

R Mentally that’s hard to tell, I feel like I’m slightly fragile and at breaking point sometimes. I think the people who do a number of different things do it because they’re those kind of people. The big thing that I’ve been discussing with some of my friends and colleagues who are in that scenario is that we’re probably not good ourselves in that we enable that, we enable people to stand back and not do more because they think so and so has done that, whatever. So it’s something that we’re quite aware of. Things like the red meat side of things, we want to try and get to a point where we’ve created it, but we have other people involved and it will be essentially a handover in terms of ok we’ve worked jointly to get to this point, it’s yours, go and deal with it. Whether or not that will then work well or not will be up to individuals whose bottom line depended on it, rather than ours where my profit and loss at the end of the year won’t be affected directly by it but perhaps those businesses that are might then take more of the reins.

The problem is, someone who’s really good at managing livestock and land, are they really good at sitting in meetings? Sometimes I think we all have to play to our strengths. I’m quite good at ideas and gathering enthusiasm and putting my energy into things, I’m not good at detail, facts and figures and this kind of stuff, there’s other people that I rely on for that. I’m going to get livestock but I’m not going to be an amazing livestock manager, that chap who walked in there, he knows how to manage sheep and cattle, he knows how to produce that, even though he does sit on about four committees I think, one of them I’m on ?

I’m conflicted there, that wasn’t a good answer, that was kind of a, it’s not really sustainable but it’s probably the right thing to do. My opinion has always been that I am lucky enough to live here, to make a good living here, to employ people here, to have my daughter growing up here, I genuinely feel that if I wasn’t involved in these voluntary things I couldn’t raise my head up and walk around. The area’s been incredibly good to me so it’s really important to me that I give as much back as I can.

I To what extent do you feel there’s a community support for what you’re doing, the farming community or the wider community?

R I think everyone is very interested in it, and very supportive of it. The stage we’re at with some of these things is it’s not publicly broadcast because it hasn’t got to that point yet. We’re trying to identify problems in a gap and then find some solutions for it, but we have done work with [organisation 1] as well in terms of having a wider food event thing, and that went down really well I think. I think there is a fair bit of support there but it depends on what sector you talk to, if you went to knock on houses in [town 1] here and started talking about this stuff with them, most probably know or have heard the term of a croft but I wouldn’t imagine would be enormously interested in it, whereas if you went to talk to them about the airport or tourism tax or potholes, probably every person would have an opinion.

I Is that specifically to [town 1], which is I guess a big group of people?

R It would probably be the same [inaudible] I would think. You’d need to move out to perhaps [area 10], [town 2], [area 1], [inaudible] probably a bit more crofting but… That’s the general mix of the island is that there is probably only really about 20-30% of the population that are actively involved in crofting. You probably have another 20-40% who have relatives in it, or family that have been in it, or might even have a croft but do nothing with it. Then there will be a fair portion who genuinely don’t have anything to do with it, and as such have far less understanding and concern over it.

There’s a bigger piece that I’ve always said in agriculture that is terrible at, not telling what we do to other people. Within the union they’re very good at talking to their own members and the agricultural press but the majority of issues that we’re lobbying on really need wider public support. We’re talking about why more support should go to these areas because it’s less favoured or it’s economically weak or whatever way round you put it, there’s not enough of that conversation about environmental and social benefits that crofting here brings.

I What sort of environmental and social benefits do you see them bringing in?

R I think social benefits probably come from the practical work. There’s a mental health element for crofters and farmers a lot of time when they get a chance to work with livestock and the land. Physical work is one of the greatest things you can do for your own health as far as I’m concerned I love working with the livestock. You also have that historic tie, that cultural tie that I don’t think there’s much point me diving into because I’m sure everyone will be mentioning that to you, you’ve probably heard enough about it already. Great ties to the past and the language and terms that you use on a croft.

There’s also, I guess the thing that’s slightly different is that communal working. So sheepstock clubs here are I think generally growing, they’re certainly static anyway they’re not going down, and that’s a great way of using land in a collaborative way, and potentially producing an income from it, and doing it in a way that means there’s not one person lambing 600 sheep or whatever. Then common grazings committees, where they are active and where they are effectively active, and that’s a big barrier as well. It’s an amazing format, those guys are managing 2-12000 hectares of some of the remotest land in the country, and they’re able to get together and exchange knowledge. There’s amazing young crofters and stock handlers and stuff here, they’ll know how to work a dog and they’ll know how the run of the land works and how sheep will come off the hill. When they’re doing all of that stuff they’re also learning about getting a greater respect for your ground nesting birds and different plants on the land, and what stage they might try and go for a [inaudible] or whatever it might be.

Then environmentally the stark thing from that [inaudible] project, I’m probably the type of person that maybe I picked and chose the best bits of it, but they did a number of different… When you peg out an area of land and then different test sites for that and they looked at it really closely and found what different species were on there. From what I can see the areas of the common grazings that were up there on [area 10] that were well managed with cattle and sheep grazing, produced way more biodiversity in these plots than where it was just cattle or it was just sheep or there was nothing. It had a lot more species there because of the way the livestock animals interact, cattle and pigs [inaudible] sheep [inaudible] vice versa. Not over-poaching it but also having it grazed to the right level, not understocking it so you produce a big benefit with the amount of species and creatures and insects and different types of fauna and different types of grass, and whether there was clover there or not. I think that’s a real skill as well, knowing when to put stock out and when not to, how to mix them together and what animals will eat what and how. It seems to produce big environmental benefit through that.

Then of course what you’re talking about in the document here, about the kind of carbon [inaudible] element of human management and such like that are going through. There’s very little industrial process involved in upland sheep farming as far as I can tell, there’s not that many chemicals really. You’ve got the public health side of things, which is areas, grazings where they have a decent control of tick on sheep obviously means that there’s less tick from there for humans. There’s huge problems in Uist with that at the moment, lyme’s disease is four times more likely to get lyme’s disease there than anywhere else in the UK. And that’s going to be a mix of the tick population for sure but also the fact that there’s less sheep there, they’re not dipping sheep any more so it is harder to get bigger flocks under control, you’d have to use Spot-on for every sheep which would take forever, but also there’s more deer as well that aren’t being managed as well so the ticks are rife over there.

There are a few crofters who have very bad lyme’s disease, and they’re the kind of folk that in the past when they were dipping and all the rest of it, they would come home and would be scraping them off themselves after they’d been working, but they never had any symptoms or anything like that. But the more it went on with less stock reducing and less treatment being employed, that was when lyme’s disease went up as far as I can tell, and now they’re suffering from it.

I Do you see that as a threat to the tourism?

R Possibly, I just think the public health element is something I’m more concerned with but you’re probably right, if the scary Mail and such like get their hands on these kinds of stories then they would love that. The press are no longer about fact, it’s about what’s the most sensational thing you can write, which is why you always get [area C] [inaudible] people listening in cars, Donald Trump owns Uist, just nonsense.

I You mentioned the carbon, that’s not featured in a lot of crofters when they talk about what they’re doing, that doesn’t seem to be recognised as something that…

R Probably because they are not aware of it. Certainly it’s something that I don’t know a huge amount about but people who are a lot cleverer than me talk about it a fair bit, and certainly our vice president Martin Kennedy, he talks about it a lot, he’s quite a clever chap, a farmer himself in Perthshire. That’s the main thing he talks about, and about the fact that those figures have never really been calculated, they’re never equated into any carbon cycle formulas.

The network always talk about cows farting but that’s the thing that everyone focuses on. I’m sure it is bad but how bad is it compared to how many aeroplanes we have in the sky, how bad is it compared to how many freight ships we have bringing couscous back from wherever it’s coming from. The balance seems unweighted, it’s unfair, other people are allowed to slag us off but as soon as [inaudible] take this personally [inaudible] I think we’re doing a very poor job with investigating those sides of things to really show how much benefit we bring.

The other thing environmental-wise is that we’re supporting multiple species as far as I can tell, geese in Uist and Isla, would there be such an abundance of those animals if the crofters didn’t have the grass for them to eat, despite the fact they have to kill thousands every year just to stand still. Sea eagles, would they be upwards of 180 breeding pairs now, plus all the juveniles, if some of them did not have lambs to eat and ewes to attack.

I Why do you think there’s a problem with sea eagles that doesn’t appear to be with golden eagles?

R Sea eagles are a bigger animal, slightly more aggressive, they tend to hunt together. They’re very intelligent birds, remarkable animals. I think the thing is goldies have always taken lambs but we now have an influx of new animals and the sea eagles over the last 30 years the population has grown phenomenally. The way I think about it is what else do they need, they’ve eaten rabbits, hares, certain areas where there’s far less of those, some areas where people tell me there’s none of those left. Is there as much fish in the coastal waters as there used to be, might be, might not be, no-one’s studied it so we don’t know. So I just think where eagles [inaudible] and this isn’t me defending them but thinking about it fairly we’re going to have to [inaudible] somewhere. I think because that means there’s a lot more birds here that’s probably why the effect is far more pronounced than when it was just golden eagles, because there’s a lot more of them.

Environmental-wise is everything [inaudible] with the crofters and farmers do under SSSI regulations, of which we have loads of in the area here or AECS schemes, corncrakes cover or cover crop for this or plant trees in that area there. There’s a management of land that brings no actual environmental benefit I think that crofters maybe don’t think they need but they do, creating new drainage and things like that, putting lime back in the soil perhaps or whatever it might be. Again you probably know more about this stuff than I do but I find, I’m really proud of what they end up producing, I think the problem is that we ourselves don’t really know the true volume of it, there’s been no study that produced the average or anything like that, and we are historically awful at telling the wider public what the benefits are.

I think it’s an enormous, the subsidy that agriculture gets, especially in areas like this, is so massively multiplied by what it ends up creating. Even just financially, it’s something like £1 creates four or something like that, by the time you’ve paid your insurer or your feed merchant or your fuel or your tractor dealer etc, times it. Then you have the environmental benefit. I’ve been trying to tell SNH and they’re changing the way that they’re designing their support schemes, I think it’s fantastic what they’re aiming towards because ideally they’re looking for a bottom up approach which talks about what the land is, what someone can do and what they can produce and then basing incentives on that. Rather than at the moment, as you probably know the way it works is, they tell you what they want to achieve and then if you take that off and that off then you get £1500 a year.

I I’ve been told it’s very hard for a crofter to tick enough boxes.

R It’s difficult because of the points scoring, but it’s not, it’s worth saying that the area has a lot of AECS scheme, and a lot approved. Yes, it is probably harder but with SNH moving to this kind of idea it will be revolutionary really, it just needs crofters and farmers to think more about what they do produce, rather than what boxes they need to tick, it’ll be a culture change for them. The thing I’ve been telling them, related to sea eagles, related to geese and such like is, everyone is going to have far more strict larger environmental-based targets in five years, ten years’ time or whenever it was. The people who can deliver those targets on the land are crofters and farmers because that’s the tool that you use in order to do this or do that project or whatever it might be.

The longer we take to realise that and support that, the less of those people there’s going to be, so in order to try and create a big environmental management impact in five or ten years, we have to pay attention to what’s happening now and already the stock that are going off hills and the land that’s being abandoned because you won’t be able to flick a switch and turn that back on in a decade’s time. It doesn’t mean that we just need to flood money in, what we do need to think about options and considering what land can do and what land already does.

I If you were to wave a magic wand and have a resilient [area C] at would it look like and what would you need to have in place?

R There’s multiple strands really. I think that the education of the wider public in terms of what we do and getting more fresh local meat in schools and things like that is probably really critical. That’s all about trying to develop the market, because the market’s completely broken at the moment as far as I can tell. If we were able to educate from a younger age, and have people going home almost guilting their parents into buying something that is better quality and all this kind of thing, I’m not saying meat for dinner every day but two or three times a week, whatever you can afford, but you spend a bit more on that so you get something local then that will help create more of a demand for it.

There then needs to be far more control over the economics of supermarkets and shopping and things like that than there is right now, where the ombudsman, we’ve got one but he doesn’t have that many powers, doesn’t have enough teeth to be able to enforce any real strict rulings around what you pay producers versus what you charge.

Quickly divert from there and say I was really interesting [inaudible] they had a French bureaucrat there talking about everything that has happened in France over the last two years. I was completely unaware of the enormous change that they’ve gone through there in terms of their food economy. This was because of Macron maintaining one of his policies was to redevelop the food and drink industry ostensibly. They went through a huge consultation process and such like but basically it’s all about shortening supply chains, and they bound a lot of this legally, and supermarkets can’t sell something for less than they buy it for, I’m pretty sure buy one get one free is illegal now. So they’re trying to change behaviours by making sure that the value of something is retained, rather than it always having to be cheap for the consumer, to try and encourage a more steady basis of supply.

The entire idea is that producers end up getting more so they create and produce a group, so rather than it being one business or two businesses selling to a buyer it’s now 10, 15 or 20, so they’re trying to get more empowerment to the producers and try and make the consumer buyers more aware and more responsible towards it. France has a massive food culture anyway. I was blown away by all of that because I thought that is so alien to what we have here.

I Is that something you’d like to see?

R I think a lot of that makes sense. Yes, there would be a lot of kickback initially but there’s no reason why people on lower incomes, if we created the ability for them to buy cheaper cuts of good meat, that they couldn’t still afford it. Chicken nuggets and stuff like that, you could still have good chicken in there. I guess that side of things would be better because I don’t want there to be any subsidy or support for agriculture, it’s ridiculous that we have to subsidise our food producers. The aim of it is so you can get cheaper food but we either need the price of food to rise so that producers get more money or you need the subsidies to rise. Subsidies are never going to rise ever again, we’ll be lucky if we hold on to the same budget we have right now. So why can’t the food cycle be more accountable and pay people more for the job that they do? A bottle of water should not cost more than a bottle of milk. [inaudible] massively high quality milk, huge standards around all that kind of stuff.

Even if you’re going to sell like a lamb from here in the food chain, the amount of controls over all of that is phenomenal. It’s difficult to comply with all of that but I think as a producer we should all take faith from that and say we’re producing something that is higher class, we have wonderful disease controls in Scotland, we have got a wonderful disease status at the moment. This is high health stuff, yes it goes up and down obviously some folk have got absolute [inaudible] and some people have top of the range stuff.

I think it’s kind of ground up, there’s a lot of culture changes that need to occur to be able to marketplace might operate more fairly. The one thing for [inaudible] we’d love if there was an abattoir, I think that would create enormous benefit, it would create jobs, it would give us more control over our own destiny to be able to produce something, kill something, sell something, market something from here, and have a standard system involved to make sure that the quality is being upheld. The big problem with that is funding [inaudible] I’d also like, I think one big thing that would probably affect the area is if we were able to become more self-aware and self-determined in what everyone is doing. So more aware of what benefit we are producing and what commodities [inaudible].

I Would you see these things becoming more diverse, you mentioned pigs earlier, would you imagine bringing in dairy, bringing in more vegetable goods?

R I think it depends on the type of person. If you only have one small croft, you’re not really interested in much more, it’s probably not sensible to have more cattle, probably more sensible to have chickens and a polytunnel and a couple of pigs. I think for guys who have a bit more land they might do something along the lines of… It depends on the way they’re set up, some folk are doing incredible things right now and I don’t think they really need to change, but for others maybe who have pigs and what they’re doing is grubbing out an area for you or something like that, and then you go in and plant it afterwards or you just use it them your own needs so that you spend less in the shop, or you just have ten pigs every four or five months and you sell all the meat off them and use that to re-fence something or something like that.

It’s not necessarily that everyone needs to change but I think providing more information and people having the will to look at different facts and see what it might create for them I think is really key. They maybe don’t do anything if they know about it, it just depends [inaudible] change it.

I Energy production, is that part of the…

R I think that’s all wonderful stuff. We’re lucky enough here that we have quite a few wind turbines and we’ve got quite a few hydro schemes. The biggest factor in all of that is the cost to build it and getting the capital to put something in. Then also now the [inaudible] powers and such like are fairly non-existent for a lot of it, what is the incentive sometimes for folk. There will be some people who would probably put it in anyway because they might want to generate their own power. That seems like a daft thing to me as well, switch the tap on, the thing starts filling up with renewable energy all over Scotland and then they go, well better just turn that off, produce that [inaudible] power, take that one away altogether.

They keep increasing the targets towards a more renewable energy driven country. It doesn’t quite add up for me there. Surely one of the best ways to get more of our energy generated renewably is through private-based schemes, because you’d have a far greater coverage if you got 100 households to do something rather than two big firms who can afford to invest in it. And you start changing people’s attitudes towards renewable energy as well because people stop thinking climate change [inaudible] all of that nonsense.

I What do you see as the biggest challenges coming up, in terms of, if you’re going to be resilient you have to be resilient to something?

R Do we need to mention the B word? I think a general disdain in terms of the importance of food in our society is probably the biggest threat I think. Food production should be equally as important as healthcare or education, or police or prisons.

I Some people would link food production and health.

R Exactly. I don’t think they’re linked right now in terms of public importance. It’s kind of ring-fenced right now but we’re going into a new arena where potentially it could be secure. Growing world population, more people on earth, there’s not more land to feed them, more pollutants going out in the sky. I didn’t realise [inaudible] that’s really an opportunity, let’s take things down to more of a local level and stop amalgamating everything and considering it from all of these hubs. Let’s not just think about [inaudible] land, it’s just Inverness or Scotland is only Glasgow and Edinburgh.

There is the potential, I know this is going more into like a feudal economy, where you have a more insular economy, but for me it doesn’t have to be insular in a bad way, there’s still going to be money coming in and out, goods and services coming in and out. But I think if you gave smaller communities more empowerment to create that kind of circular economy, the results it could produce is maybe we could retain more of a population than we already have because young folk realise that there is work here, there’s things to do and you don’t have to disappear from the area. We don’t just become a retirement community.

I How do you empower a community? What would you need to put in place for empowerment?

R More tools to design our own fate. The great example is some amazing things happen here locally is people doing stuff. The amount of community trusts that we have in the area, village halls and things that they’re doing and all the wonderful activities that those mainly volunteer groups are leading. It amazes me that we have to do that first of all, that councils and governments aren’t producing these kinds of facilities and resources, but because it’s tied to that group of people in that area it’s much more suited to that area I think. I think in food production you need to apply the same ethos I guess, because if we are able to have an abattoir, a cutting plant and a marketing group for our meat then there is some control there over, we don’t have to just rely on what the market pays.

I If, instead of individuals being given subsidies, [inaudible] was given a subsidy for a group to manage for the benefit of the crofting community, how would that work?

R I think it would be a great idea in idea form only. The massive issue would be the resentment and the kind of, why is he getting that type of thing and the vested interests and all this kind of stuff, it would be very difficult to control in a fair way. I’d like to think it could work amazingly and produce amazing benefits, because I think that kind of idea is totally, that’s something I believe in. The way it would land on the ground, I think everyone is too used to it being theirs and mine, this is my entitlement, why haven’t I got my money. I mention that to people quite a lot and say a subsidy is not your money that’s the taxpayer’s money. That money is to do the good that you’re doing on the land to produce the food you’re producing, it’s not your income, you should not think about it like that.

I Another suggestion, completely theoretical, if some of the subsidy going to individual crofters went to the infrastructure, abattoirs and roads and whatever, would that have the same problem?

R I think that would work if it was driven by the fact that the Crofting Commission were actually of any significant use, in terms of what policing they do. I don’t mean in general, but if they were able to actually properly investigate and instigate inactivity and make a change on that… For instance, say if someone hasn’t put any livestock on land for 15 years then claiming subsidy up to that point, if they were able to identify that and have that subsidy removed from that person, it would be that removal of the subsidy from that person [inaudible] to go into a fund for that infrastructure to be based on the area where that money is no longer going on land, that’s where I can see that being an enormous benefit. I don’t think there would be many active, intelligent crofters would think about that that would disagree with it.

I Do you think there are many people who are actually not working the land?

R Yes. There are people who are claiming tens of thousands of pounds more than they’re entitled to, across Scotland, hundreds of thousands of pounds.

I Why do you think that is?

R Because they can. There’s no, yes you’ve got to declare whether you’re active or not, and you’ve got to put things down on forms and all these kinds of things. There are supposed to be procedures in place, there’s supposed to be inspections. If someone has a croft for 20 years and it’s a small croft, nothing’s really happened to it, the Department of Agriculture probably have never visited it, and at the moment probably never will, so there’s no method of catching those folk out. It’s not going to happen by honesty sadly, they will just collect the money.

A lot of those people won’t allow people to take on a proper tenancy of croft in case that tenant, because being a crofting tenant is probably one of the best [inaudible] within the UK and there’s huge amounts of protection and ability for crofting tenants to do a few things and because of that, becoming a new entrant as a tenant really difficult because people want money for it, solicitors advise owners to charge for a tenancy, that person could say get off that land it’s mine. There’s a huge amount of flaws that if there was able to be more resource given and more legality given to there being an enforcement agency for these kinds of things then you could recoup that money from people who genuinely just are not on the croft at all, and put that into projects in that area. It’s quite sad but definitely [inaudible] my house that hasn’t seen a sheep for 30 years [inaudible] there’s no tenants in there.

I That’s been fantastic, I might come back to you if I can and keep bouncing ideas because you’re obviously thinking a lot.

R One issue is the detail and the complex knowledge that I don’t have, I struggle to spend time to do it.

I It’s been really interesting to get your perspective on it.

R I really care about the area. Agriculture, the food and drink industry I love it, I’ve been all my life involved in it in one way or another because it’s so important. The whisky industry is incredibly important to Scotland and that’s inherently tied to, most of the arable farm and livestock farmers [inaudible] draff produced. Sadly to have a generally bad name [inaudible] better at explaining why people should understand that this is a hard job.

I I think it might be changing, a lot of the rubbishing is, it’s much more about the intensive farming and people actually think grass-fed agriculture is quite a good thing.

R I think in Scotland there’s very little intensive farming. The majority of it is on rough, common grazings these kinds of things, there’s not much that you could consider as being huge machines going over massive tracts of land.

End of transcript