ResULTS project: case study Ca, interview 211

Face to face interview with agricultural industry, conducted 14/3/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

I What does resilience mean to you?

R Ability to cope with change I suppose. My primary thing in my head if someone mentions resilience, it’s the ability of your business or yourself to cope with stresses to the business.

I What kinds of things would make up that coping mechanism?

R Diversity of income. Looking at a marketing, adding resilience if you’re cutting out some of this middle bit because you’ve got a bit more control of price basically. Diversity is a bit of control on your actual final price, it’s a bit resilient if you can be here I think.

I We’ve come up with three different patterns of resilience, one is about buffering, if you like absorbing change, you take less income out of the business or you draw in your belt basically. Or you can include small amounts of adaptation, like change the kinds of dose that you use or the way in which you dose the animals. The third way of having resilience is the ability to completely transform what you do, and that could be doing tourism, doing renewable energy, getting rid of your sheep and just having cattle. Does anything resonate there with you?

R I think it all sort of ties into my very simplistic definition of what I thought to be resilience, it all ties into that. Do you mean in terms of our own business?

I You could answer it from your own business, probably more from the food system point of view. I suspect answering it from your own business might be a bit sensitive.

R I am uncertain of what to say. In terms of us at the moment, here. Generally crofting is, the main thing folk are doing in an attempt to be resilient where they can is diversify, because there’s not much else available to people. A few folk have tried doing direct marketing, but that’s [inaudible] slaughterhouses that we have at the moment are, it’s almost like a hobby slaughterhouse in a way, the guy is very good but he can only do it at certain times and there’s not enough throughput, so you’re kind of limited to that. Tourism’s just an obvious sector for people to hit, there’s a lot of people going in, a few people can do wee campsites and holiday lets if they can and bits and pieces like that.

I Have you got lots of people putting up pods?

R Not yet, thankfully, because I’ve got one. We’re building a house just now and we bought a pod to stay in whilst we were building, then we’ll let it out. The building’s taking a lot longer than we anticipated. Other than that, I don’t think folk here generally, although on paper they’re probably relatively resilient I don’t think they do much consciously to be resilient, in the large part. A lot of the folk that we deal with, and a lot of folk that are crofting here generally are towards the older end of the demographic scale, and I don’t think they consciously do anything in terms of resilience a lot of the time. I think they might look relatively resilient on paper but if a radical change was to occur they would adapt but I’m not convinced that they are ready to adapt. That will be much the same as [area C) and places like that, I would assume.

I Would most people be part-time crofting?

R Yes, 90% at least probably. There’s a handful in [area 20}that maybe work full-time, 20 maybe, something like that. There will be more than that when I think about it but most will have some sort of subsidiary income, they’ll have fishing or something, a holiday let or something, but there’s not many at it full-time.

I Are there plenty of jobs that people can do?

R No, not really. You’re limited to employment, the main employers here are the [organisation 10], which is subcontractors associated with that, plumbers etc, and then the fish farms. There’s a seaweed plant started up that has offered a reasonable opportunity of income for, they’re trying promote it as being good with crofting, where you can go out and do a few hours but there’s not a huge amount of people doing it. There’s not a vast amount of unskilled work or labouring-type jobs that you can just go into outwith farming without having to do something else to get those jobs. It’s a struggle employment-wise. [person 13] and I are both relatively fortunate in that as soon as I left uni I had a job here, and I’ve been in this job for seven years.

I And you’ve got your own croft?

R Yes, we’ve got our own croft now [inaudible] house, shed going up as well. I’m bankrupt basically but getting married next year, to sort of do everything at once. I intended coming back here for a year and I’ve been here for nine and a half years. Things have worked out quite well for us, but work is undoubtedly the challenge for young people. Even my other half, she’s a PE teacher and she couldn’t get a job here and there’s a job came up at the airport as an air traffic controller, so she retrained in Cheltenham for nine months and is now an air traffic controller. You’re very limited as to what there is to do essentially.

I What drove you to stay here more than a year?

R I don’t know, felt trapped. When I was here all the time I don’t think I really appreciated it. I was in Aberdeen for five years because I didn’t know what I wanted to do, I was going to study aeronautical engineering and I pulled out of that course, I think it was a week before I started it, and went into agriculture. Then I guess coming home made a bit more sense, I came home and had the opportunity of work, I quite quickly after that got a croft off my grandfather, he’s got another two at the moment, and we just work, he’s the boss. We work together, you do have a degree of a sense of duty, you feel I am obviously, I presume I’ll be a successor to that, I don’t really know. We’re in a standard farming family debacle but we don’t really know what’s happening because it’s skipping a generation. I’ve got a bit of it obviously but who knows what’s happening after that. I really enjoy crofting, I’ve got a good job and I really enjoy the people and everything here. It’s a great place to live, there are downsides to it, you miss civilisation a bit, but it’s generally a very good place to live.

I One of the issues is about young people not coming back. The question is why are they not coming back?

R Work primarily I would say. We’ve got a lot of friends who would be very keen to move here but there’s just no… This last two and a half years there has been a massive increase in the number of young folk about. When we first moved back there was hardly anybody and then one of my childhood pals, he lived across from me, he went round the world travelling and he came home, and he’s crofting at home now, his dad gave him the croft so he’s crofting full-time. There’s another guy moving home to work for the Water Board. There’s a lot of young couples in [area 21] doing various bits and pieces, so there’s been a big increase in young folk about but there are a lot more that would be happy to be here if there was employment. If you come home the difficulty is if you want a good job you’ve almost got to create it for yourself. There’s good teaching jobs and things but in terms of other employment there’s very little.

I It sounds like there are people who want to do the hard graft of crofting if they can get perhaps an income to do that with.

R When folk are here all the time, I was a bit of an anomaly in school in that regard because I really enjoyed crofting, most folk thought it was, I hate crofting [inaudible] but now a lot of folk think it’s a good way of life and when they’re starting to look at having children as well and they’re living in the middle of a city, I had a great upbringing on [area Ca] when I look at it, and they all come back. I think they move away because they want the social aspect. It’s good here at certain times of the year, you get fantastic ceilidhs but it’s not throughout the year. It can be quite a lonely place I think if you didn’t have something else to occupy your time.

I What do we want to maintain with the resilience? Obviously income is one of them but if we look at some of the literature, these are the kinds of things that people have been wanting to keep, some of the functions or the goals of resilience.

R That’s what people are wanting to maintain as part of their business.

I Are there things here that you think either resonate with you or resonate with what you see as your clients?

R Reasonable profit margins, most people here aren’t hugely focused on profit, they’re not really sharks that are out for every [inaudible] they can get. From a personal point of view, the only thing in terms of our own business outside work, I just expect it to cover itself basically, I make a wee bit. It needs to make money though, if it started making a massive loss I would question it because there’s a heck of a lot of work goes into it. Succession and food security I suppose are key. Personal and family satisfaction as well, we want to keep everything going because it’s been the way of life, and it’s a good way basically. Obviously you want to ensure food security for everybody if you can.

I What is the route for food security? Do you grow your own food as well as keep sheep?

R We grow veg as well, we do potatoes, carrots, cauliflower occasionally, and other bits and pieces. I’ve got a wee poly-tunnel for personal use. We’ve got a [inaudible] outside but just a wee garden [inaudible] carrots and things in every year, onions, they taste better. That’s more a personal satisfaction thing because it’s good to have and you’re not having to go out and buy it, it’s a good thing to do together. I don’t think we’re doing much for climate change. Biodiversity enhancement, I think that’s something as well that we’re quite mindful of, especially, basically all crofters here are in agri-environment schemes, but I think even if they weren’t a lot of folk do already carry out things in a way which is good for the biodiversity that we have here.

Folk are very mindful of all the rare species of birds we have, and generally there’s nobody out to destroy everything. That’s important because we’ve got some, I was a bit naïve to the rare habitats and things we had when I was younger but when you’re actually helping folk put together management plans for it, and managing it yourself I suppose, just by means of grazing, you can see the importance of that and how rare it is. From a UK perspective there’s none of some of the habitats we’ve got here, and there’s certainly no farming like there is here, maybe in [area C] it’s sort of similar but it’s low intensity and it’s a good way of producing food I think. It’s probably not the most efficient way of producing food but it’s, from someone who eats meat and everything else its perspective, I think the way that animals are produced here is a good way.

I Do you finish animals here or do they go to the mainland?

R Lambs we’ll get some off fat, we could get more off fat but we don’t do it consciously, just because there isn’t. Marketing is the issue really because you can, there used to be a group called Highlands and Islands Livestock Ltd, they used to come out and they would do weight and grade basically for lambs, maybe they did that on [area C] as well. They basically came out and if you had fat lambs then you could get a fat price for them, they’d go straight to slaughter. But that kind of died a death and there is now a local haulier who will sometimes take a load out to Turriff if there’s fat lambs, but most of them will go through the [inaudible] and all cattle will go through the [inaudible] because we don’t have the feed basically to fatten anything here, most of it goes to Black Isle or Aberdeenshire, or somewhere a bit more fruitful, then fatten them up.

I So there would be lorry loads going out?

R Yes, quite a few. The numbers have dropped a lot but it all goes basically away, there’s very little fat. They used to slaughter a lot here, lambs particularly, so [person 14] who’s got the slaughterhouse now, it’s his father’s, they used to kill a lot of lambs. He used to buy a huge amount of stock and he had lambs on the Black Isle and he’d send it there, but he used to slaughter a couple of thousand lambs a year, and they’d slaughter them on [area 22] and send them off as carcases so they could get twice the number in the lorry, and it’s just much more efficient basically, rather than moving live lambs about the place.

I What changed?

R He just stopped doing it, and then there’s no successor to that. Obviously that was back a good number of years ago, and he would have been making good money at it and I guess he made his dollars and stopped doing it, and there’s no-one else that… I don’t think the margins are what they used to be in that either, because I think the price of lamb has increased a bit in terms of value of money but if you look back, there’s a diary in here from 1970 and if you looked at the price of lamb you would say is that all it’s gone up in that period, we did look at it with a time value of money but I can’t remember what the equivalent was, but it was incredibly poor. If the money had increased by inflation as it should have done over that time period we would have been getting a lot more than we get now.

I I spoke to somebody who brings some of their stock to [area 2] for slaughter rather than taking them to Dingwall, which I thought was quite interesting.

R They’ve got a good service in [area 2] and they’re friendly as can be, it’s just they’re less commercial now than they used to be. [person 15] was quite a savvy businessman I would say, quite unassuming but very on the ball with things. His son is also very good but he’s not a businessman in the same way.

I It’s interesting because you said that people who come here almost have to make their own jobs, have to be entrepreneurs and have to be businesspeople, are those… It feels like those skills might be lacking?

R Yes, I think there’s been a bit of a… A good friend said there’s basically a brain drain from the place most of the time, he said anybody usually who’s academically skilled leaves to go and do a job and they rarely come back. He said that’s the kind of people that you want to retain because a lot of them have the ability to create a work like that. There’s a lot of good people have stayed here that have done good work as well, it doesn’t mean to say that you need to go to college to achieve anything, but there are a lot of these people have left, a lot of these people with entrepreneurial skills.

I How important is the availability of capital?

R Very. Even from a crofting perspective, or if you want to start that very basic, especially if you want to be here the difficulty is, housing, one, because it’s not like there’s an abundance of housing. You can sometimes buy a house but most folk who have a croft will probably want to build a house, having built a house or in the process of building a house, it’s very expensive. Myself and my other half were in a pretty fortunate position in terms of income, relatively anyway, we’re not on the rich list or anything but we’re comfortable so we’re able to borrow money that we can build a house. But I would see it being a massive struggle for someone who is self-employed, even if you’re self-employed it’s a nightmare anyway to get the mortgage because you need to have X years of accounts. All these things just impact on people coming back.

Is there a shortage, that’s the difficulty? The problem is, there’s plenty of houses perhaps down here in [inaudible] or somewhere like that, but it’s maybe that people don’t want them, they don’t want to stay there, it’s just that it’s not suitable. If somebody gets a croft they tend to want to live near it, so there’s not really an abundance of houses, there’s usually a house on a croft and then they’ll rarely [inaudible] one house for sale that’s right beside the neighbour’s house. The only houses that come up tend to be unsuitable usually. If you were desperate you would do that but it’s difficult.

Capital in general, if you were looking to start a business, I think it’s challenging. It’s ok if you’ve got something, like I’ve got the croft but I still could get, you can’t lend against, you can’t get security on a croft, so basically starting up you’ve got nothing, unless you’ve been fortunate enough to have savings or you can start to build a house, in which case you maybe have a wee bit of equity on a house. It’s very difficult capital-wise, there’s not many people attempting to do things. I’m only talking from personal experience but I know the people who are doing things have plenty assets that they can hold a security over. At meetings we’ve held in the past where folk have been talking about what they would like to do, it’s always been capital has been the main issue. For people that have ideas anyway, that they wanted to take forward, it was getting money to actually implement them.

I Is there much community funding of things?

R No, not really. There’s been [inaudible] the wind turbines on [area 23] that had a community fund and you could apply to that for, there’s set amounts you could, a couple of thousand, you could get a bigger project if you wanted, and they’d be assessed. But that’s kind of gone quiet, I’m not too sure what’s happened there. That was going for a few years. [area 20], they’re in the process of putting up some community wind turbines, doing the plans and things just now, it’s going to be a couple of years, and it’ll be another five or six years before there’s any revenue that can be used. The idea with that is that will go into the community, you can bid for the money for an idea of some description, but the sums of money were modest. There’s a young couple trying to do a distillery just now, I don’t know them very well but they were saying capital is an issue, so it’s going to cost a lot of money. The Chinese folk to invest in it [inaudible] quite keen on the whisky just now.

I Is there issues with [inaudible] for the [inaudible] or is there room for more turbines?

R It’s basically at capacity. But there’s a tricky balance with wind turbines because, the argument at the time was it was affecting the radars at [organisation 10]. They do cause disturbance but they can fit something to them that helps point them out on a radar, but apparently you still can’t differentiate between it sometimes if it’s an aircraft or if it’s a turbine. As long as there’s only a few of them it’s easy to work out but if there’s loads of them it becomes a very messy kind of picture. It’s a balance really because how many turbines do you put up to the benefit of a few, if there’s a lot of folk working down here that’s going to put the [organisation 10] at risk. That’s the kind of balance.

I That’s exactly the sort of tensions that we’re looking for.

R That place employs a lot of people. There’s a good number directly, and then if you include everyone that’s indirectly employed by them between subcontractors and everything else, it’s huge numbers, it’s a lot on island terms.

I You mentioned that biodiversity was interesting here and certainly you’d awoken to the special nature of this part of the world. Anything there that would be particularly important to maintain do you think?

R Natural landscape, preservation and habitat, soil enhancement. That kind of links back to 14, to biodiversity enhancement. Counteracting, that connects to…

I Sometimes you don’t think about things that are so obvious that you don’t think to mention them. You say the crofters do a lot to maintain biodiversity, what sorts of things are they doing?

R The people who are machair land primarily, the people on the west side of the island where it’s moorland are quite unfortunate because they basically get low income from the crofters, there’s very little they can do in terms of getting subsidy. But people on the other side of the island, they will tend to be, just traditional practices really, cropping the machair areas but on a rotational basis so you’ve always got some fallow ground. That’s good for biodiversity, it gives flowers a chance to set seed. In terms of grassland, basically it’s excluding grazing or having light grazing for certain periods, to allow birds to nest without trampling them. When it comes to grassland, grassland is used quite a lot but it’s corncrake primarily for that, and they just cut it in specific ways so that you’re not murdering them all.

We’re hoping to do a map to show the areas that we had worked with for these plans, but if you look at the east coast of [area Ca] there will be 60 [inaudible] 80% of the land would be managed to some degree. If they didn’t do that folk would probably just graze all throughout the year, they certainly wouldn’t be quite as mindful of the dates. It does definitely help having a proscribed thing there that you’re being paid for, and if it wasn’t there you’d probably see folk collapsing to [inaudible] earlier in the year. It is to the detriment of quality and everything else, mostly grasses. We don’t get much grass funnily enough and if you’re leaving it cut off for however many months it tends to be pretty rubbish grass by the time you can actually [inaudible] graze it.

I There is a bit of a trade-off between managing for birdlife and biodiversity, and managing for agriculture.

R If you were fully managing for agriculture you would do things probably quite differently, you would graze a bit more intensely at certain times of the year. The whole purpose of the money is to pay that difference, it’s not supposed to make you any better off, it’s supposed to compensate you for what you’ve lost, theoretically. Looking at from what I am aware is what Michael Gove envisaged for the future anyway, it is this kind of ecosystem services type stuff, which I think we do here but the difficulty with these kinds of peripheral areas I think is that we get forgotten. I think we do a lot of public good, because if you look at some of the public good [inaudible] in England, they’re deemed to be public good in some areas but it’s a pathetic effort at public good given we manage basically everything in a good way. I suppose from their scale where everything is monoculture a wee bit is probably good.

I If you wanted to design a scheme specifically for this area, what would you do?

R Basically what people are doing. There has to be a level of support, because if… The support keeps people doing it, if you didn’t have the support there’s probably, some people would go back to managing more intensively and crofts would probably have to get bigger because that’s the only way people could sustain it. Or the other thing is people just wouldn’t croft, and then you’re going to lose a lot of what we’ve got here because it would become overgrown and it wouldn’t be the same.

If you cut subsidy here there’s not going to be any crofting basically, because already in most cases it’s probably an expensive hobby, in time if nothing else. So I think if you… The cuts to subsidy in [inaudible] quite concerned, very concerned, I think folk are aware to how critical it can be for people here. The only bonus is that mitigating anything there is that a lot of the crofters who are largely unreliant on the money have been crofting for a long time so they have probably got some reserves to help them be resilient I guess. But in terms of going forward, if you were somebody new, a successor to that, it’s pretty uncertain.

I Would you say you’re kind of on a tipping point on the edges of a tipping point?

R Yes, potentially. If we lost the subsidy at home, I don’t particularly make much money at it anyway, you’re basically paying other people. It spreads the money about but making an income from it, hats off to somebody who can make a good income at crofting. I am but I’ve only got ten cows and 40 sheep at the moment, collectively we’ve got 25 cows and 120 sheep. It’s a reasonable sized unit and if you put everything together you could make a living at it but it would be, the way cashflow is in terms of what comes in from the Department, I don’t know how people can survive because it’s ludicrous. Just how erratic it is.

I’ve looked at these things for seven years and in terms of knowing what you should get paid and what you have been paid… I could work on my own but there’s some people been missing money, they haven’t been aware, there’s no way you’d know because you don’t get, the letters that come are so unclear, they might have an amount that comes with the letter that isn’t what comes into your bank account. It’s incredibly shoddy, you wouldn’t accept it, if it was a private company doing it you would say this is ridiculous, you’d have got rid of them a long time ago. But when you’re held at the mercy of, it’s the government you can’t do much to them but it’s ridiculous.

I I haven’t thought through that cashflow thing but I guess in terms of subsidies that’s important.

R For new entrants, you’ve got no entitlements, you have to apply for entitlements. Say for instance I was a new entrant going in this year, I would claim on my IACS form for the first time then if you had been a business previously you would like get a loan letter in October/November to be paid before the end of November/December. So you’d get 80/90% of what you should get, if you’re a new entrant you’re probably unlikely to get paid until the following June, so you’re going to have an extra, and it’s probably the person who needs the money most, everyone needs it but you’re going to have no income at all for that first, an extra six months basically.

Everything has slipped on a lot, these agri-environment schemes, they’re supposed to be paid, management for 2017 is supposed to be paid in January 2018, in lieu of the year you’ve just completed, but at the moment, for instance last year for my ’17 management I got paid in January ’19. It’s not even slipping, it’s just always been there, which is ludicrous, it shouldn’t be that difficult to pay something on time.

I Would that make a big difference if they sorted out the cashflow a bit better?

R It would just make it, it would make it possible to budget I think is the main thing. At the moment you don’t really know, it’s getting a bit better but they’re still faffing about with loans for everything. It’s fine, it’s an advance payment, they need to call it a loan, but I don’t understand how four and a half years into a £200m system that it can’t pay people on time.

I This is a thought experiment, as far as I know nobody’s advocating this but from what you were saying there’s an issue about housing and getting capital. If some of the grant was put into a central pot that would be more for buildings and infrastructure, how would that affect things?

R I think what would help, I don’t know if that would help hugely. There is a crofters grant scheme there, so that’s been improved a lot, there’s a lot more money as well but equally houses are a lot more expensive. I know there is the, the loan scheme was, a lot of folk said that was very good because you were able to get a mortgage when you couldn’t get one anywhere. But there is another mortgage company that has started that is available in the Highlands. That I think offers a potential for housing, so I think you can do it, which is expensive and it will be tight to do.

In terms of grant and things, in terms of actually putting infrastructure on crofts, I think it would be a good idea to have a pot for development, so if you had an idea, an almost business start-up type grant, even just if it was to do feasibility study or something. There used to be more money readily available through the local Council to do stuff like that but I don’t think it’s quite so available now.

The likes of croft grants, the difficulty is at the moment, if you were building a shed, there’s the shed that we’re building at home, there’s going to be £35,000, you’ve always got to pay that all first. At the end of the day it’s going to cost me about £6,000 so I can live with that, but the fact that it is going to cost £35,000, you’ve got to pay that, wait an unknown period of time until you get that back, it’s supposed to be 90 days but some folk wait 180-200 days to get that money back from the government, and that will put people off. Focusing on new entrants, it makes it incredibly difficult, it’s alright if you’ve got some money or are able to get a loan but it shouldn’t be so complex, I think that puts a lot of people off.

I Thinking a bit more about what sort of pressures and [inaudible] disturbances there are. Again, we’ve come up with some suggestions, they might not be helpful or may be helpful. There are various things, from the physical drivers of climate or whatever, whether it’s extreme events or gradual changes, things like price volatility or the power structures [inaudible] food chain, you’ve already mentioned, and whether there are social drivers as well. Any of those strike you as being something that really are important to keep an eye on?

R This is things that could have an effect on resilience basically?

I Both opportunities and challenges.

R A massive challenge here is weather, undoubtedly. Increasingly impacts, it’s more extreme, we’ve always had very volatile weather, it could be summer in the morning and winter in the evening, it’s still very much like that but it seems to be a lot more severe. In terms of keeping stock, there’s a lot less, I’m going very much on my short time involved in crofting relatively but I know from speaking to my grandfather things they used to get during the late summer/autumn they always used to cut, they used to use a binder for cutting corn and stook it, stack it, take it down and thrash it and all the rest of it. You’d have a couple of weeks of good weather and now you’re lucky if you get two or three days in a row.

It’s the same at silage time, we used to cut everything, dry it, bale it for hay and you’d get, I don’t know if he’s maybe got his rose-tinted glasses on when he looks back but he was saying you’d get enough period to do that and now you just seem to be chasing your tail with one thing and another. It’s [inaudible] life seems to have speeded up for everyone, I don’t really understand why, we’ve done that to ourselves, but he says he’s conscious that there doesn’t seem to be the consistent good weather there used to be. There are periods of very good weather but it’s very spiky, and that causes difficulty for basic crops and grass generally.

I But people do still have crops here?

R Yes, there’s been a big change of what, I don’t know if that would bother [person 16] and the people at RSPB but there’s been a big move away from binder and stooking corn, it all goes to silage now. There’s a few factors there, there’s time, I don’t think folk have the time any more to do as much as they used to of that, but definitely weather and pests, if you can [inaudible] geese are a pests. That’s been the biggest probably drivers, weather and geese to changing that.

I So they grow grass for silage, do they grow crops for silage as well?

R Yes, they grow whole crop. Usually a mix of native seeds, oats, rye and barley, and any combinations thereof. It’s usually oats and rye and they’ll have barley or oats and barley. It’s basically all that landrace type varieties folk are growing as well because anything else you plant, it won’t fall over but it will be manganese deficient usually.

I Is that seed easy to get hold of?

R Usually, but this year particularly there have been quite a few folk who have been struggling to get a hold of it. There’s less folk keeping it. We used to keep enough for ourselves and then enough for another few but I’m working quite a lot and grandfather is 80, but he is less enamoured with chasing geese at all hours of the day trying to keep them off it, so we just had to spend and we’ve bought stuff in. We’ve been alright because he’s usually [inaudible] about something ten days before it happens, not ten days, 100 days before it happens, he’s very proactive, so he ordered his seed before it was harvested, but there’s a lot of folk who are still [inaudible] poor year last year.

I Where would he get it?

R Just another crofter here. If you [inaudible] away you’re not going to get the varieties we have here, these home-grown jobs that have questionable plant breeding in them. You could just plant a mainland crop, there are things that will grow but folk tend to keep to what they know.

I Do you harvest a mixture of rye and? Does that then tend to change over generations and become more one type of seed?

R It can do. There will be quite a lot of folk will grow whole strains of something, folk will tend if they’re mixing a bag [inaudible] they’ll just put in a whole bucket of oats if they want oats, and then a wee bit of the mixture.

I So you can mix your own or you can get it as it was?

R We’ve always had, I don’t know why, we’ve always just had straight oats, not [inaudible] grows well but its protein is pretty rubbish. There will be some folk will keep these straight bits of things and there will be folk who have mixtures and you can get it if you need it.

I So you need to know who’s growing what?

R There’s a couple of folk will be known to have, they grow a lot basically so you know who to contact. You know who’s got good clean stuff usually. There is a guy from Aberdeenshire, he bought a croft down here and he has taken a couple of tons away, grown a field of it away and sprayed it, God forbid, just so he could get a clean seed crop. He’s taken it back and that’s been quite good because folk have then got a clean thing to sow.

I Here they wouldn’t spray?

R Rarely, occasionally spray for [inaudible] because that’s the only thing that takes over big-style, but very rarely.

I Would you hand weed?

R Just leave it. Generally, because we’re growing the machair soils, it’s so alkaline that the oats, rye particularly, rye [inaudible] it takes off and eventually will choke out all the weeds.

I And it doesn’t collapse?

R No.

I It must be quite a short variety of rye then?

R Relatively, yes. It’s normal crop-ish high, because nobody’s putting on growth regulators or anything, it’s all just relatively short stuff.

I Thinking about how that works with a part-time job, if the weather forecast says you’re going to have a window of a couple of weeks of good weather, how easy is it to say I need to take two weeks off?

R It depends where you work I think. I’m relatively fortunate in that you can just book leave. You’re not really your own boss, you still have to put in leave, but as long as you’re not leaving anything critical then we’re relatively ok. It would be the same with [person 13] and [person 17] if they wanted off for something, as long as we haven’t got anything pressing then that’s fine.

I But if you’re teaching or…

R Teaching you’re knackered basically because you’re reliant on getting either a contractor or a neighbour. There’s quite a lot of folk use contractors, but [inaudible] in the evenings doing a bit here and there.

I Do neighbours work together?

R Not all neighbours get on but certainly a lot of [inaudible] standard. There’s not the same amount of community working as there used to be but there’s still a lot of folk working together. Down where we are, we’ve got machinery between two neighbours, so we just get everything with that other two boys, and that’s really useful. We don’t all need to be there, somebody could be away, somebody could jump on another machine and…

I I guess that spreads the cost of the machine.

R Exactly, it makes it a lot… There’s [inaudible] one of my neighbours but he’s full-time, [person 18] is full-time as well, it just makes sense rather than spending £10,000 on something, you’re spending, even a third is a bad amount to take.

I Do you [inaudible] and things like that as well?

R There’s not many, no. It’s bizarre, there’s so many on [area C] but there’s one here, there’s two [inaudible] actually there’s three [inaudible] as well, but they’re not what they used to be, it’s just a few sheep, it’s not massively active in comparison, because I know the ones on [area C] [inaudible] over there they’ve got…

I They’ve taken off, that’s people doing different things I guess.

R There’s not much of it here at all.

I Geese, can we just unpick that one a bit? They clearly are a big issue here.

R Yes, just too many of them basically.

I What can be done to manage them?

R I’m uncertain. They’re looking to, not looking to, they have taken away the money you used to get for it. When I first started, when I first came to [area Ca] I was working on a life project, it was a machair life project, and I think in that project there was something like 70,000 a year for goose management in [area Ca], so a lot of that went into just buying scaring devices because it looked good on paper. It didn’t help, to a degree, but if you’re scaring them you’re not really solving the problem, there’s just too many of them. The population [inaudible] counts of 7,000 or thereabouts, but that’s only a count of what you see, so you can quote 10-15% minimum extra probably somewhere around the place.

When they’re talking about the target population they’re saying now, the target population they have is around 6,000 and I think if they did reach that that’s still far too many. I think they’ve looked at a new population of about 2,000, which I think is more realistic but how you get from 6-2 is, it’s not easy. You go to meetings and they’ll tell you just shoot more, and I got [inaudible] shooting geese and they’re not easy to shoot. Basically it needs money to sort that problem because it needs to be coordinated and you need to get people in who are willing to do it.

The only way you’re going to control numbers of that size is netting goslings or something and taking them out, because that’s really the only way that you’re going to get that number. It’s not pretty or enjoyable but there’s too many, and Barnacle are an increasing problem as well because they stay here a bit longer and there are more of them, and we don’t get anything for them, you get an allowance to shoot, a bag of 50 I think is what they allowed [area Ca] last year, and 50 out of 7,000 probably.

I So you get Barnacle geese and Greylag.

R Greylag are here all year and Barnacle stop in for a couple of months just to ruin the grass. Between, deer are an ongoing problem as well but basically between deer and geese it’s a constant battle because if you’re putting out fertilizers, most people are using a wee bit of fertilizer but if you’re putting that out and other animals are eating it other than your sheep, it’s not helping. Controlling geese I think here, deer you’ve got to be the controller of your own destiny, you’ve got to get on to the estate or you can shoot them if they come on to your ground, do something about it basically. But geese, I think if there isn’t money of some description put towards that, at least until it gets to a sensible stage, if you got to a stage where it was at a population that was manageable I can sort of agree with them that they could reduce or take away the funding, but what they’ve done is said we’ll do this adaptive management. The adaptive management pilot, they did that and that came to an end and then the money just went. So it was like [inaudible] no money. There’s not that many people that can shoot either, can or will. It’s quite concerning.

I Is there anything special or unique about, we’re talking about [area 20] or [area 24], that you think is critical to preserve?

R Agriculture really. I think maintaining crofting in these areas is key, it’s key for the habitats we have, for the people, the way of life. I think keeping agriculture going here is critical.

I In terms of what sort of mitigation [inaudible] strategies are available, is there anything on that list?

R Most of the stuff’s there. I guess diversifying and working together to share resources is a very sensible way to help improve your resilience, because you’re not having to spend as much money and it helps you be better equipped for any changes that’ll come. I don’t know if there’s anything else I can think of. The only thing that people could do is a bit more, I think we need a more concerted effort in terms of marketing because we don’t really market ourselves very well. We’ve got a livestock mart but we don’t actually market ourselves, people come to buy the stock…

I I’ve seen there’s one meeting in the summer at the mart.

R There’s a few sales a year, there’s a few sales in [area 20] and a few in [area 23]. [area 20], Dingwall auction marts and [inaudible] auctions on [area 23]. That’s quite good, a wee bit of competition, but we don’t… We’ve got quite a good product a lot of the time because a lot of the stock here is in high health schemes, so if you were to [inaudible] anywhere else in Scotland there’s not many, there would be a few in high health schemes but not to the same degree there are here, but we don’t actually actively promote it. I think we’re paying quite a lot of money to be in these schemes that have, to get the certification, and then we just sell them like any other normal cattle. So we don’t do enough self-promotion.

I Do you think buyers come here because they think the whole mart’s going to be high health?

R No, I think they just come to buy cattle. The biggest thing that’ll have an impact is if you’re in QMS or not, and that’s just a bit of a swizz really because they’ve made it so that if you’re not in it you’re not going to get the same amount at the abattoir basically. It’s good marketing on their part [inaudible] control on their part.

I You pretty much have to be a part of QMS?

R Basically, yes. It doesn’t matter too much for sheep but cattle you’re down about £100 a head, unless you’ve got one in which case you’re cheaper to stick with it.

I What’s the link between tourism and crofting like?

R In terms of agri-tourism? Very little. It’s very separate I would say. There’s nobody offering an agri-tourism holiday at the moment. Fair enough you’re camping on a croft but there’s no actual… That’s what we thought would be quite cool to be at home would be to do something like that, the problem is time because I quite like meeting people, I like speaking to people, I like speaking generally. But it’s just how you do it because it’s quite time-consuming and there needs to be a financial benefit over and above what you would get just from doing the tourism. At the moment there’s so many people coming just to see the place that… I don’t think we inform people enough about what we do in terms of agriculture here, even walks and things like that around the machair, there is the likes of [inaudible] there’s lots of walks there, not signposted but you can walk around. I don’t think we make a massive effort for tourists other than to give them somewhere to stay, which is ok just now but I don’t know what the long-term implications of that’ll be.

I don’t think there’s anything obviously else that I can think of. I think we’re quite vulnerable generally, because we are, if you look at the financials of most crofting businesses basically all of their income would be subsidy, all their positive income, they might break even with stuff but the thing that actually pays them to live is the subsidy, and I can’t see that we’re going to reach a point in livestock prices where the consumer is willing to pay what it would need to pay to pay a wage out of that meat, because it would need to be so high. Something needs to happen, there needs to be, that’s what subsidy is, it’s just bridging a price-gap from what people are willing to pay. Something will continue on that basis but obviously they won’t look at it on that basis.

I Thank you very much.

End of transcript