ResULTS project: case study C interview 185 part 2

Face to face interview with 2 crofters working together, conducted 22/2/19

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R1 and R2

I When you think about resilience, what sort of functions are you trying to maintain? These are some ideas, are there any of these or any additional ones that particularly resonate, thinking this is important to maintain?

R1 Looking at profit margins obviously, succession, reasonable workload, sufficient local employment [inaudible]

R2 As far as profits are concerned, my dad says that’s one thing, all the years of farming he’s always made a profit. I remember someone made some comment at a meeting, made some joke about farmers [inaudible] profit anyway, my dad stood up and said actually every single year I’ve always made a profit.

I Why do you think he makes a profit if other people don’t?

R1 I’d like to think most people do. The main reason I think people are not making a profit is that they’re not reliant on it for their income, if you’re relying on it you will have to otherwise you would be as well giving up and doing something else. It would be insane to do this amount of work and this amount of stress and commitment and not make a profit, I would be saying you’re a big silly if that’s what you chose to do as your line of work.

R2 If it’s a second job.

R1 There’s big differences in crofters, if you’re wholly reliant on this income, which we are, or if it’s just a sideline, when you’re a joiner or teacher or whatever.

I You said succession was important too.

R1 Yes, I suppose the farm’s been in the family for generations so we can’t imagine ever… To think of your kids taking over, I’m not 100% sure that’s what I want but I’d like to have it there as an option.

R2 As far as we were led to believe, my father did it with us, if we wanted to work on the farm, great, he would encourage us but he never pushed us.

R1 No he didn’t but he did try and make it as good a place as possible, which would obviously tempt someone in because it’s not…

R2 We’ve worked for a few other crofters, just taking odd jobs and some of the environments are pretty horrendous, you’re working with cows, you’re up to the top of your boots in muck, it’s not very safe handling facilities, very few sheds, you’re out in the elements the whole time, and you come back to what my dad’s created and it’s concrete floors, sheds, good galvanised steel [inaudible] good equipment as well, tractors and things like that.

R1 The point he’s making, you can go on forever into why but the point is he made it appealing, attractive option.

I So you’d like to make it attractive for, or you’ve got kids you may have in the future?

R1 In this day and age you could make so much more money doing almost any other job I feel. As a sideline, it’s quite hard not to say you could get any kind of profession and do enough to collect the subsidies, and I would argue against that. Any joiner these days, I know they’re enjoying a bit of a boom time, plumbers and electricians, they’re all making serious money at the moment.

R2 It’s not all about money though, it’s lifestyle as well.

R1 It is money if people build a house or get a mortgage, these things all matter. It’s all very well saying, [respondent 2] was very fortune given a house and I was lucky dad helped, the business helped build my house. If you couldn’t offer that to people then they have to think about getting their own house, which is a mortgage and that’s where money is important, and when you have kids.

I Is there anything else in this list that you think is important to keep? Or anything that’s not on the list that you may think I really like keeping nice cows or sheep?

R1 It doesn’t go in your nature to downscale or that sort of thing, it’s almost like, generally speaking we’re thinking can we keep more. It’s ingrained in you I guess.

R2 Every place has its limits. The conservationists are concerned about overstocking, up here it’s not really possible.

R1 You’d end up spending a fortune in feed in wintertime.

R2 You couldn’t overstock here, it’s not…

R1 You’re always having to watch as well what the subsidies are doing, are they requiring stocking density, are they going to backdate it, which is the logical way. If I was making up subsidies I’d backdate it at least three years so as nobody could change their system and benefit massively, it would be to historical. You’re always thinking that as well, you don’t want to do anything silly that might have long far-reaching consequences.

R2 It’s slightly nerve-wracking the LFASS dropping 80% for the 2019 payment. Although we are hearing different information there. My dad went to a CHIC meeting, a Crofting, Highlands & Islands Committee meeting in Inverness, and they were assured that they were going to get the top-up.

R1 I don’t know for sure.

R2 Yes he was, for the first year it would be topped up.

R1 He seemed to think that they actually could get extra the money.

R2 Even the second year it was meant to drop into…

I We went to a cross-party group on crofting, a meeting in Edinburgh and they seemed to be saying that they were going to find a way of keeping it up, whether they do or not I don’t know.

R1 Someone should tell the college that.

R2 We went to a meeting just last night, the college did it in Portree, and she was quite adamant that we were going to lose the top-up.

R1 It was a high risk. I think nothing’s on paper to say, and until it’s on paper they can say what they want.

R2 What she was basing it on was, apparently she had seen the amount of money that had been allocated and it was 80% less.

R1 I know but did you not say that the extra 20% was going to be coming from the government?

R2 I don’t know.

I How do you manage this kind of uncertainty? Are you trying to do something that’s going to compromise something that may change in the future, how do you…

R1 How do you control the wind, these things are so far beyond…

R2 You occasionally tighten your belt a bit and that’s it, that’s what you have to do.

R1 You just don’t buy the machinery or…

R2 You hold on to your equipment a little bit longer, hold on to your car a bit longer, you get by that way. A lot of guys on the mainland over the east coast, they can buy brand new tractors every couple of years, we buy second-hand ones and hold on to them for even longer.

I There’s obviously a challenge to maintaining your income, are there other challenges that you’re aware of, challenges or opportunities?

R1 They’re so multi-faceted. There’s the financial, you’re at the mercy of the government, where the subsidies come, because obviously subsidies is a major part of where we get our money from, we wouldn’t even consider it if it wasn’t for that obviously. You’re always at the mercy of these things changing, new schemes coming in, is it going to suit you. We’ve always said our set-up here, we’ve got a pretty big area of land, we’ve got quite a lot of green and we’ve got quite a lot of stock, so generally speaking no matter how they manipulate it we normally do ok.

R2 When they changed to the Region 1, 2 and 3, we’re slightly better off.

I Which region do you come under?

R2 One and two.

R1 One is the permanent grassland, two is rough grazing, but on a historically heavier stocking density, it was going by an LFASS system way back.

R2 Two and three were basically the same, poor quality land, it just depended on your stocking density.

R1 It was their way of trying to make sure it didn’t get down to too much in the heathery hills of the highlands, which concerned us just as much. That’s the thing, when they’re trying to come up with a new system and these east coasters or people down in central, these highlanders, the money will just disappear up into these hills if we don’t… That’s a concern to us as well because working from one pot of money and I don’t want to see it, I want to see it going to production and…

R2 Yes, huge open moorlands there that it would be ridiculous subsidising them for nothing.

R1 That’s where they came up with that system.

I How much influence do you feel that you have, because you have got a role in some of these committees?

R2 Funny you should say that because we did hear them talking about, this is going to be Region1 and Region2 land.

R1 No, there was no talk of a third, there was just Region1, Region2, that’s all it was, rough and… We were trying to keep the…

R2 Was it dad that came up with that?

R1 No, we got a photo of the land boundary of ours which showed rough grazing of ours and rough grazing of a neighbour’s, and when I say rough grazing of my neighbours it was hardly used, and ours heavily used. They both were definitely classed as rough grazing but one obviously was being used a lot better, a lot more.

R2 Ours had quite a bit of green in it as well.

R1 And are you trying to suggest we should get paid the same amount on both? The President of the Scottish NFU took it, loved it, thought this is great, this is really important can I keep this, yes, showing everyone round the table. The next thing we heard about this three payment system, which was splitting the rough grazing to a historically higher stocking density. We don’t know for sure, how could we ever know that that was directly…

R2 We actually keep that slightly quiet because there’s a few people here, around this area, who ended up in the Region3, and they are furious about this idea. But at the end of the day they don’t have much stock so…

R1 As somebody said, the only difference between 2 and 3 is productivity, so why would anyone, how do you upgrade your argument for getting more money.

I A lot of these payments are to do with the environment, how important is that for you?

R2 We do an environmental scheme, yes.

R1 We’ve doing that now, we’re on our third scheme for that.

R2 We had a township one, up the glen, up the [inaudible] and it’s all the shareholders in the glen. It’s a stock reduction of the hill.

R1 Sometimes it’s off-wintered.

R2 Yes, but it’s to keep stock off the hill at a certain time of the year. And then we do our own personal one.

R1 It’s a bit of a gamble because you have to pay to apply.

I Is that because you need to get a consultant in?

R1 Yes. We have to get a consultant but I think there is actually a fee as well. Or is it all in the consultant?

R2 I know [inaudible] charge about £2,000.

R1 Maybe that was all our fee.

I But it costs you money to apply for money?

R1 Yes, it’s quite a lot of money.

R2 Luckily we have always been accepted.

R1 We have always been, we speculate to accumulate, so you’ve got to be in it. Sure enough we’ve got into every scheme we’ve applied for.

I Someone told me you’ve got a lot of lapwings on your land, is that right?

R1 Yes, a lot of lapwings.

R2 That’s where a lot of our funding comes from.

I Do they just turn up or did you do something?

R1 That was called Peewee Hill. My grandpa called it that and that’s what my dad refers to it as Peewee Hill. You get the young ones hopping around there, it’s amazing. Up there, when you’re walking around, you hear the lapwings and snipe, so you get the lapwing and that one and it’s a really weird combination of noises, but nice walking around here, it’s brilliant.

R2 One of the environmental schemes, the other one, the corncrake one as well, up [inaudible] silage fields.

I Is that your neighbours?

R2 It’s our own.

R1 Anything in-bye is our purely our own, silage fields, all our silage fields are in these mown grassland for birds or a corncrake scheme.

R2 Most of them suit us quite well, but some of them are quite tricky to [inaudible]

R1 It’s not perfect but you have to weigh it up with the extra monies.

R2 The corncrake one’s a bit annoying because you would want to be cutting your silage about the beginning of July and we’re now restricted until August, which is a bit frustrating when you see good weather in July.

R1 We had previously in one of the other schemes gone to 1 September because they tempt you with more money to cut later and later, so there’s a 1 August, a 15 August and a 1 September. We went to 1 September but that was a bad move, good money but bad silage.

I So you do have a sort of pay-off between your production, that was the environmental benefit and the finance wasn’t worth the production ?

R1 We felt it wasn’t.

R2 By the time you get tractor stuck, if the ground’s still wet at that time of year.

R1 It would suit somebody who didn’t have a massive interest, or not enough cows, didn’t matter about the quality but you could top it up with concentrates or something.

R2 We do test our silage quite often see the quality of it. We’re not quite as fanatical about it as some of the mainland guys because they want to have exceedingly good dry silage, and then they dilute it down with straw.

R1 They have these big mixer wagons and they mix up rations and stuff like that.

R2 They cut their silage really early and it’s just green leaf.

R1 Maybe three or four cuts in a year.

R2 Yes, whereas we would generally wait until ours gets to be a bit more stocky and a bit more bulk to it, and just do the one cut.

I The other crop if you like here is the tourists. How does that impinge on what you’re doing?

R1 Don’t really affect us at all, slightly more foot traffic to the castle, a lot of up and down the road when they come down here, panic, see it’s a farm, maybe take a photo turn round and drive away.

I But you were thinking of maybe getting some kind of holiday [inaudible]

R1 Yes, we’ve got the ball rolling.

R2 We’ve got an architect working on that at the moment.

R1 And it’s something pretty cool I think.

R2 Yes, we’re in the process of making changes to the plans now, it’s a slightly curved front.

R1 Loads of people fill the place with pods but… These pods can pay themselves off in one year.

R2 But I do feel they’re…

R1 I had a friend who had two, £35,000 each they cost, they’re not normal pods they’re quite big ones, and two of them in two years paid off. So they’re actually putting another thing up of course.

R2 But we prefer the idea of having something that’s going to be an asset in the future.

R1 An appreciating asset, a proper house. It’s not a proper house in the sense that, did anyone discuss what it was?

R2 I mentioned last time here, it’s built into the ground and a turf roof.

R1 I think that’s the kind of thing that tourists would go nuts over, but I might be wrong. [section deleted] It’s the property end, they don’t have showers, quite cramped. They might be ok now when they’re brand new but I’d be concerned in year three or four when they might be quite damp inside.

R2 We did think about that as well, we’ve covered all the different ideas.

R1 The thing is as well, maybe you’re charging more per night, you only have to deal with one couple, whereas [inaudible] I thought about so many ideas, loads of people come down here and say why don’t you set up a caravan park down here, you could and I’m pretty sure plenty money but you’d be dealing with a lot of people, you’d have to change your system.

R2 And a lot of dog walkers as well.

R1 Yes, lots of people, dealing with people.

R2 The more people you deal with the more problems you’re going to have.

R1 Yes, so we’ll just do this just now and it’s only one couple.

R2 Although funnily enough people have said that the higher-end self-catering places tend to be the more awkward people, so we’ve been told. I suppose if they’re paying a lot of money they’re demanding quite a lot.

R1 I think when you’re doing it, what I’m trying to do is get the minimum reason for them to justify why they’re complaining.

I Do you see the tourists linking to your livestock enterprises ? in terms of either the meat or the wool?

R1 Obviously more tourists means more busy restaurants, which means more potential for, which means more money for them. Yes, it seems to be keen to get [area C], didn’t go very well yesterday but…

I Everybody was wanting to sell stuff rather than buy stuff.

R2 I still think the location they chose wasn’t ideal, it was down in [place 2], I think if they had it in [town 1] it might have made a difference.

R1 It was the first one of its type so I don’t know, maybe people didn’t…

I So you’re trying to get people to buy into mutton?

R1 Restaurants.

R2 Lamb and mutton.

R1 Yesterday was a one-off [inaudible]

I As you were saying, the lamb isn’t there when people want local food.

R2 If we do get into this we might have to change our system a bit so that we’re producing lamb or mutton more May, June, July.

R1 It’s quite difficult, you need numbers of people on side. There’s a side thing going on taking the NFU office is starting up something and [area C] Meet group, [area C] Food I think it’s called now, and we’re trying to get some funding, but it needs a project manager, someone who could get paid.

I What I’m hearing, there’s a number of different initiatives to try and do local foods, are they competing with each other?

R1 There is a bit of that, yes.

I Would that be parts of [area C] competing with other parts?

[R1] We’re trying to make a big enough group that all are welcome. It’s not a case of we’re not trying to make it a clique of any kind.

R2 The College and NFU are big promotors of this, trying to push it as much as possible. But as it stands at the moment we seem to be the only crofters that are…

R1 We’re big, and we’re enthusiastic in that sort of area. There’s plenty of enthusiastic crofts, loads of crofters are way more enthusiastic than us I feel but not in this area, maybe business-y type more.

I And I guess you need to have the building and be able to feed.

R2 We’re slightly concerned that, they need to be talking about [area C] mutton, promoting [area C] mutton, which is great but when we last supplied some mutton it was actually more hogget than mutton, and it was in the prime of life, it was about two year old, nice fat sheep. My concern is, lots of other crofters get on to this and think, oh Skye mutton, there will be some old cast ewe, broken-mouthed and pretty lean.

R1 They’re going to have to be reasonably robust things in order to make sure that there’s… I don’t know if that would be the job of a project manager but somebody who had that responsibility of selecting, quality control.

R2 You definitely would, yes.

R1 That’s a big concern about using other people, you can’t trust them.

I How does this abattoir story fit into this?

R1 The abattoir at the end of the day is probably not going to happen. The main thing is, Brexit is not helping matters.

R2 Even without Brexit.

R1 They all seemed reasonably positive, source funding here and source funding there, but of course with…

R2 You needed 10% for the funding, from whatever source locally, and just not getting it. We even said we would put in some money, and I think there’s probably quite a few other farmers and crofters that said they’d help, but there’s nowhere near the amount. I think the whole thing was £850,000 for the slaughterhouse, so even 10% of that is still quite a lot.

R1 The mobile abattoir seems a more logical option, there’s talk of that at the moment. And I think even the group that’s involved with the abattoir are seeing the potential benefits of that as well.

R2 Even if you have a processing plant on [area C], and a depot for the local [inaudible] abattoir, to come in, have a shed there, a chilled room…

R1 But you need that, you have to have that.

R2 I know but it would be a good…

R1 I think a lot cheaper to set up. [section deleted] It’s trying to get the person with the qualifications to do it, whereas that guy’s travelling around.

R2 We know in Stornoway the slaughterhouse, I think there are stocks, they were in Orkney, they were really struggling, because they’re not getting the throughput, they’re just making enough to sustain them.

R1 And if they’re struggling I don’t think there’s…

R2 It seems like we’re the only ones that actually… I’m sure if they had a slaughterhouse here other local crofters would be using it but we haven’t heard much from them yet.

I Do crofters tend to work together quite well?

R2 Yes and no.

R1 We don’t really work with other crofters, just because they don’t… We try to make ourselves as self-sufficient as possible, dad’s always had that ethos right from the beginning, we do our own silage, our own shearing, it’s not through any problems of dealing with them, it’s just…

R2 We have had issues in the past.

R1 There’s obvious benefits of being able to do it yourself, you do it when it suits you, the weather’s good you do it, you’re not phoning up a contractor and saying why are you not cutting my grass when the sun’s shining and when it’s raining he comes. And the price of course, which I think will start going up quite dramatically, and I think shearing has been one of the most underpaid of the professions, considering how hard it is to do. So, we’re doing it ourselves. We only do 100 or so at a time, it’s not crazy numbers.

R2 But as far as the neighbours are concerned…

R1 Some of our neighbours are pretty [inaudible] in fact they just wouldn’t want to be involved with us in any way if possible. That’s a historical thing.

R2 Probably a bit in the past, maybe slightly jealous of my dad. He’s worked very hard for it though, it’s not like it was handed on a plate.

I How does that work out, you’ve got young kids and looking for schools and things, is that an issue for you or it will sort itself out somehow? Thinking about encouraging more people to be here, younger people with children so that you [inaudible] schools here [inaudible] [town 1] Hospital, how do those affect you guys?

R1 Not really. We’re probably seeing a time when you get a bit more centralisation of schools but if I was controlling the budget I would be doing the same thing, because it’s always [inaudible] and we will continue to see more small schools close down.

R2 We both went to [inaudible] School. When I left it went down to about 12 pupils.

R1 It’s ridiculous, and some of the schools are smaller than that [section deleted] And they had lots of kids when I was in primary school, so it shows you how quickly these things.

R2 It is a shame as well though.

R1 But nowadays kids can hop on a minibus that comes right to the door and takes them to school. It’s not a problem I don’t think.

R2 I quite like the small school thing, it’s almost like a wee family.

R1 Ours was a wee bit small, I was the only boy in my year.

I If we think about what sorts of things concern you, there’s obviously masses of different disturbances that could be happening, some could be opportunities, mostly probably be threats. Is there anything in this list that you think that’s a real opportunity or that’s a threat that we need to take seriously, or anything you can think of that’s not on this list?

R1 Weather, we’re seeing probably more rain than ever. Milder winters. Equally, you get weather cycles and it goes dry and it stays dry for, four years ago we had that dry spell.

R2 It was 2012.

R1 Big long dry spells. And we had a wee bit of a dry spell last year. These things, I don’t know if it’s…

R2 The general trend, even in our life 38 years, it is getting milder and wetter. I remember as kids we would always get snow here. My dad said that when he was growing up you’d have huge amounts of snow in the winter, but now you’re lucky if you get a wee dusting.

R1 Air pollution and all that not really, and soil degrading, but that happens sort of naturally, it’s up to us to keep on top of it by using CAGS for reseeds.

R2 Actually it’s becoming more and more difficult to access CAGS, Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme. My dad said he used to have loads of CAGS for various things over the years, and he’s never had a problem, always been accepted, but the past few recently they’ve been turning us down for niggly little things. The form has never been more complex to fill out, it’s all about how can you justify this, because it’s all public money of course. It’s quite a palaver, to the point where we know of someone who did, a contractor, our next door neighbour, he was doing three separate reseeds and not a single person there was using the CAGS, because it was so involved.

R1 People just can’t be bothered with the hassle.

R2 But they would have got 60% paid for.

R1 You were trying to get multiple quotes for it, and there’s probably only one person that does it. I’ve had to provide a quote for somebody to help him out, he just told me what and [inaudible]… That’s the kind of nonsense [inaudible] done it, it’s not impossible, I could have…Actually, they want three quotes if it’s anything over £10,000.

R2 [inaudible] a shed of course it’s going to be over £10,000.

R1 Some schemes are so, some of the equipment is so specific there’s only one place that does it, where are you going to get…

R2 We have slatted floors and there was only one place you could get the plastic slats.

R1 This CAGS is unnecessarily complex, it’s getting more complex to apply for it.

R2 It seems like they’re trying to do everything to stop you from using it, that’s what it feels like. In fact the last, we did one for a wee track up the hill, which have done plenty tracks in the past, we’ve claimed no problem, and it was rejected, the application, which we were quite shocked by, we took it to the College to have a look through the application, she said it looks absolutely fine, seems like you’ve done a good job here, they couldn’t understand it at all. And if you took it to them they couldn’t understand why it had been rejected.

R1 They’re tightening their belts. It was quite a long track and they said it couldn’t be justified. They’re the ones that set the common grazings CAGS at 80% and then they say it can’t be justified.

I Anything else in there?

R1 We’re probably more than ever reliant on subsidies, more than ever before. Because the value of lamb and beef have not really gone up much yet the cost of living, if you look at the cost of fuel from 20 years ago, but lamb’s not actually massively different. That’s one example but there’s loads of other things that you buy, cost of feed’s gone up, everything’s gone up, so you’re more reliant on subsidies.

I And yet lamb is quite an expensive meat.

R1 Yes, when you get it in the shop.

R2 Supermarkets swear blind that they’re not the ones making the money, but they would always say that wouldn’t they.

R1 That’s one of the reasons why we’re trying to cut out as many middlemen as possible.

R2 Even as far as our lambs, most people in here and what we used to always do was just as soon as you weaned the lambs off the sheep you would sell them in September time. But we thought, someone’s buying them, at the store, and fattening them up for slaughter, so we thought surely we should be cutting out that middleman. We’ve been doing that for at least the past ten years. It has been good, prices still aren’t wowee when we sell them but at least you feel you’re getting a, sometimes when you sold them in the autumn… There were times when we sell them straight off weaning that you would get virtually no prices, sometimes you hear prices for blackface lambs £15 or even less, so at least we don’t have that problem now.

R1 I think we had a bad experience one time, going away on the lorry and they left here looking really good, and I think they spent overnight in a pen, they got really dirty and looked pretty bad for the next day.

I Was that just to [town 1]?

R1 No, across to [town 3]. They looked pretty grim and didn’t get a great price, and I think that got a bit scunnered after that.

I How important is the mart in [town 1]?

R2 It is very important but they’re reducing the number of…

R1 We don’t use it as much as some people. There’s the early lamb sale which does quite good prices out of that, people do quite well.

R2 The other thing is of course is transport costs are inevitable.

R1 Some people are small scale so it’s considerably more expensive for them. We used to fill an arctic, economies of scale and all that.

I That’s all about on the sheep side, what about on the cattle side, is there any development on that side of things?

R1 On the cattle side of things, it’s just the same as normal. Let me think how our systems have changed.

R2 The only thing we are doing with the calves is having better set-up for when they’re calving, and trying to make sure we have fewer deaths. We know our neighbours, one in particular…

R1 It’s quite hard to [inaudible]

R2 One of our neighbours has terrible losses of calves. He does a slightly different system, he calves throughout the whole year, we try and condense it to a couple of months so we can monitor it much more.

R1 It’s what they’re recommended.

R2 And also he doesn’t have any sheds, we’ve got a few sheds and we pull in the ones closest and monitor them.

R1 Another nice big shed would be good though. Never enough sheds, not even close, I don’t think we’ve ever got enough sheds at this time of year.

R2 It’s just basically trying to keep them alive, that’s probably the best thing we can do.

I But there’s no sort of niche market that you’re heading for?

R1 The reason that we’re not going down that route with calves is because they tend to require a bit more time to take them to the finish, two years or whatever it is for a normal finished calf. So you take them through the next summer will being fed probably concentrates as well as being out on good grass somewhere, we don’t have that really, so it doesn’t make sense for us to take them past. You can take them through a winter, some of the younger ones, my dad just sold some yesterday, but it just doesn’t make, there’s no sense in us keeping them.

I Was there anything else there?

R2 Brexit, who knows, even the politicians don’t know. The infrastructure, yes.

R1 Little things that are annoying, we had a couple of mysterious deaths in the shed, we want to find out what they are, can’t get them autopsied but they said really you want to get them to Inverness. Can you imagine driving all the way to Inverness with a dead lamb just so you can get an autopsy done, post-mortem or reason for death?

I So that’s a piece of information that you’re not going to have?

R1 Yes, exactly. If you have a breakdown with machinery sometimes it can be a bit tricky, the cost of getting a JCB…

R2 You’re paying the full rates as soon as they leave Inverness, three hours of travel each way.

R1 Obviously these are just the joys of living remotely.

I Thinking about how you might respond, for example you’re saying the winters are getting warmer and wetter, how can you mitigate that, how are you responding to that?

R2 More sheds.

R1 Put up a hydro scheme, which we have. It’s not so bad, taking advantage of the rain.

I So there’s an opportunity that comes with extra rain here?

R1 There was, there’s not now, stupid government and, it’s just insane, I don’t understand their logic. Why would you cut those [inaudible]?

R2 Okay maybe they were crazy high initially but reduce them to a sensible level and then keep them going.

R1 That’s classic government, they just can’t get it right, they put it so stupidly high, wind solar everything, they put it so stupidly high we thought it was a no-brainer, everyone was trying to jump, we did try and put up a big wind turbine and failed because of grid.

I There’s a couple of turbines up in [inaudible]

R1 Those ones, yes but much bigger than that. They’re 20s, so we were talking about 900, different scale.

R2 A scaled-down version of the ones over there.

R1 They got carried away, they started off with a 330kw but it was because you saw this poster and you could get government-backed finance for it, because it was tied in with the feeding tariffs and everything, so as long as you had this list of requirements…

R2 The Co-Operative Bank were funding it.

R1 …you could get it up and running, you could get £1m or more of funding. But it all started to spiral out of control.

R2 We got consultants to do the whole planning permission, and various surveys. That was £45,000 of surveys and planning, and then we had to do a MetMast as well, collect a year’s worth of data. Fortunately I was on a Fire Brigade course and I met a guy who worked for Chill Wind, and they had MetMast, and he said I know someone who could rent you one.

R1 One of the requirements for these Enercon turbines is they need to have a year’s worth of data.

R2 We didn’t [inaudible] because we know the winds, we’re in a very windy part of the world.

R1 But there’s other things they want to know, they want to know wind shear, turbulence and all that kind of stuff.

R2 [inaudible] I think for the finance though they wanted it within a kilometre radius, somewhere within that area. And also similar heights, which is about 50 metres high.

R1 That didn’t work out. Something might still happen there.

R2 There’s a London firm that’s asked if they could look into it.

R1 Apparently they’re going to go for planning for two bigger turbines, so they say, and is that ok they said, I said absolutely, if you feel like applying for two bigger turbines, they think they can get grid, that’s fine.

I [inaudible] connector that’s the ?

R1 It’s getting the power off the island that’s the issue.

R2 The problem is, the big companies over in [area 1] and [area 2], they’ve swallowed up all the availability.

R1 All the capacity in the grid, and that’s why we couldn’t.

R2 It’s 50kw that was it, the maximum you can put in is 50, unless we spent a huge amount.

R1 Which wasn’t made clear in the very beginning, this was all top secret.

R2 We even spent £6,000 on a survey with the SSE, Scottish and Southern Energy, and nothing came up about all the problems of the weak connections.

R1 The first grid offer was maybe subject to transmission works. I questioned that paragraph, what does that mean, and they said that’s fine it’s something we always write into a standard issue to cover themselves. Now looking back on it we’re thinking, what were these transmission works, were they the huge amounts of works that’s apparently going to get done 20-21, we’ll never know.

R2 It’s a bit frustrating because the last quote they were talking about was to connect I think it was going to be £550,000, which was an unbelievable amount of money. It seemed like we were paying to basically improve all the infrastructure in the area, all the poles have to be changed and lots of work in [town 2] had to be, the substation up there a lot of work had to happen to that. It seems a bit unfair that we’re having to.

R1 We’ve had loads of companies who have contacted us since saying, we’ve got great grid guys, a really good relationship with the Hydro and they’ll find good connections where other people fail. Many have come and gone without securing anything. But this last one they say they’re going for planning because they can get grid, we will wait. I refuse to get my hopes up on anything because it’s been one of those journeys.

I But it hasn’t put you off trying to do new things?

R2 We’re gluttons for punishment.

R1 It almost felt like that, the feeding tariffs were so fast in and no sooner were they in than they were decreasing, and then decreasing to such a level that a few years down the line they made no sense.

R1 Yes, get it to a level where it makes…

R2 I think Orkney were limited to 2kw, anyone that wanted to put up a turbine. They had a funding up there to put up all the turbines.

I Is there encouragement in [area C] to do alternative energies or alternative tourist things, or is it just that you’ve decided that’s something you wanted to do?

R2 It took a fair bit of stomach to go for the water turbine because we had just heard the terrible news that we weren’t going to be able to put up the large turbine, we’d invested a huge amount of money into it, and then other… It was a local guy happened to mention to a hydro company, the [family name] have got plenty of land…

R1 It’s a small company, two brothers from [area 3] started up…

R2 …doing little hydro generators. So we were one of their first clients and they came up here, we still had to invest £90,000 putting it up, but we did a lot of work ourselves, we got a digger so we could lay the cables and…

R1 We were there pretty much every day.

R2 It’s been one of the best investments ever. We make between £25-30,000 a year out of it. Up [inaudible]

I Would it be ok to have a look at it?

R2 The last house in the glen there’s a track continues on, just follow the track right up to the end.

R1 And just before it crosses the river there’s a wee turf roof, that gave us the inspiration for the, a turf roof building that’s built into the bank and inside it has got a generator.

R2 It’s only 15kw but it’s running non-stop, it’s never stopped apart from maintenance.

R1 And [inaudible] a lot of the time.

R2 It’s not too bad, it’s got a 50m drop.

R1 It must be 80-90m, [inaudible]. The cable was a bit serious because that’s a km of cabling to the house, but that meant we ended up getting an aluminium cable. It was massive because it’s not such a good conductor but it was a lot cheaper. We had to price up both, so we ended up with a big, solid, it was quartered…

R2 We’re quite resourceful, we’ve got these two huge reels of cable each one weighing 3 tons. We thought ok, how are we going to roll this out.

R1 We struggled initially to get even into the trailer, we managed to get a pipe, we stole an old support beam from the shed, a diagonal one, but because it’s got a second shed the first one was redundant, and we cut it, we used that through the middle and welded up some supports.

R2 We all find a way with these things.

R1 That’s how we managed to get the cable out.

R2 It wasn’t over nice green fields either, you’re talking pretty rough terrain.

I Coming back to the resilience thing, let’s say you’ve got your two turbines and you’ve got a nice price for the electricity coming out of that, would you think you were now so resilient you could do away with the sheep and the cattle?

R1 No, never. I often think that, if we won the lottery would I give up. I’d probably get someone in, and even then it would be painful getting somebody in because they wouldn’t take care of your machinery the way you do, when it’s your own place you’re looking after it a lot more, you might look at our place and think that’s not looked after in the slightest but…

R2 There’s always stuff to do on the farm, and we know what needs to be done. Even if you think to yourself I’ve finished all these…

R1 Even dad said he’s been there with plenty of people working for him and they break a lot of stuff.

R2 And unless you tell them to do things they’ll just stand around, you have to be on at them quite often saying do this, do that.

R1 You’d probably scale it back a bit, you’d get the best equipment, make it more fun. And you wouldn’t be so reliant on it to make a profit. I’ve disasters you would cry yourself to sleep.

R2 As far as, last year where the bull was not working, we were pretty sick for a few nights.

R1 Dad said it was like a car crash in slow motion because the guy was scanning them, that’s how we found out.

R2 [inaudible] We did get some calves because we had another bull but not nearly as many as usual.

R1 Overall that year we did end up with over 30.

R2 Yes, but it wasn’t anywhere near as many as we normally have. But, weirdly enough, a neighbour of ours had a bonfire and it caught the hill and burnt up the hill and into a tree plantation of ours, which we did years ago, burnt the entire plantation, and we had it insured, so the insurance payout more than covered the loss of the calves.

R1 We should use some of that money to plant some more trees again but we’ll wait a wee bit and see how it recovers.

R2 It chose the right year to burn down.

I Trees, do they feature in your portfolio at all?

R1 Yes, we planted 32,000 trees up the back. It was on a native woodland scheme, 15 years, which is up now, you get paid and then you have to wait 15 years of having the trees and not getting paid. [inaudible], we might have to put up a few extra trees.

R2 That was some scheme. We fenced it off, planted all the trees and we thought they’re not growing very well, why are they not growing very well, and after five years someone was meant to come from the Forestry Commission to check over the trees and say yes they’re all growing fine, and you would get your third payment. Payment was two-thirds initially and then one-third later on. We were really nervous because we thought they’re not growing, what are we going to do. After about six years they contacted us and said you should have arranged for your visit, and we had to say they’re not growing very well so what do we do. He came out and had a look at them himself, and he said the problem is deer are getting in here and nipping them off, every time the buds come up they’re getting nipped off. We thought it was pretty poor land but it was deer.

They gave us two options, either we put deer fencing round the entire area and replant any ones that had actually died or we hand back the entire money for the scheme, which I think would have been about £28,000. So there was nothing for it, we did a lot of deer fencing. It was probably about £5-6,000 in materials, but we did it all ourselves. We virtually never get anyone in to do a job for us, we will always take it on ourselves. So we had sore legs and arms for a while after that. I think there was about 3.5km of deer fencing but the guy came afterwards to check it, it’s all fine and we got the payment. We actually managed to replace one of our tractors so it was pretty good.

I How resilient would you say you are?

R1 Not particularly. Obviously the hydro thing does prop us up financially quite a bit, so if things were to, it’s a good buffer definitely but that is not infinite and it’s a little bit silly to, that’s why we’re trying to use that money to build this thing over by, to last longer, to go on and on.

R2 We’re already five years into the turbine scheme, it’s only 15 years more.

R1 So if we don’t do something smart with the money we’ll just waste it all on farming, won’t we…You would sell the electricity, which is £4,000 a year. [inaudible] this morning but [inaudible]

I So the feeding tariff is the critical?

R1 Yes, definitely. But of course if something costs, I say £90,000 and that was us doing a lot of the work, I reckon if we hadn’t picked up a shovel you could have added another £30,000 on to that probably.

R2 At least. Laying that cable would have cost a fair bit.

I Where do you get all your information from and your consultants from, for all the various things that you’ve been doing?

R2 As far as the bit turbine it was [inaudible] I think my dad saw the [company 1] Consulting. That was a company that got the planning permission for the big wind farm over there, the [area1] one. They got planning permission for that one, which seemed to sail through compared to the [area 2] one, so this seems like a good company to use. We should have probably done more research though because they were really expensive, about £150 an hour.

R1 That was if you were using a top guy.

I It sounds like you don’t employ people but you do employ consultants quite a lot.

R1 For that we did. We knew that we needed experts. [person 2] is good for applying for environmental schemes, you know when it’s sensible to use somebody else.

R2 The physical stuff on the farm though we will always do ourselves. Actually scanning, that’s the only thing we’ll get in for guys scanning cows and sheep.

I He’s the guy from New Zealand?

R2 The sheep one’s from New Zealand, and we get a local guy to scan the cows. Other than that…

I What would happen if the New Zealand guy decided he wasn’t going to come any more?

R2 I actually asked him this year, I said you’re not thinking of giving it up some time are you and he said, I’m not planning it.

R1 Someone will take in, fill the void.

R2 The vet does do it.

R1 The guy does it, [person 3].

R2 But he’s older, and the vet would do it, [person 4].

I Is it fairly easy to get vets when you need them?

R1 Yes, not too bad. Never on time but that’s maybe just vets in general.

R2 I think she’s more the replacement for [person 5], which we were gutted when [person 5] retired, he was so good and right on our doorstep.

R1 In [area 4].

I It’s not always easy to get vets, particularly for livestock.

R1 You’re a bit nervous when you lose someone like [person 5] who you’re going to get in to replace because we’ve seen some pretty wishy-washy types, but [person 4]’s good.

R2 She’s hard core, the stuff I’ve seen her dealing with.

R1 It’s amazing, she quite often has these young lasses from all round the world, they’re young dainty things and they’re like, right can you just cut the head off that calf while we try, because it’s jammed, and they don’t even flinch.

R2 That’s not the worst though, the worst tends to be something that’s died in there for a while and then you have to remove it.

I It sounds like you’re pretty well set up, you don’t feel vulnerable.

R1 We still are vulnerable to too big a hit on subsidies. Long-term I don’t know what you would do.

I What would happen if there was a big drop in numbers of people keeping sheep or keeping cattle?

R1 Hopefully it would push the price up. Other people having more or less sheep matters not to me, unless it affects the market, which would put the price up or whatever, otherwise it doesn’t bother me if they have less or more. The only slight issue we see is with the hill, our sheep could wander more or our neighbour sheep can come in because there’s no neighbour sheep to buffer them.

R2 And, especially up the top of the hill, the wildlife are going to take, their 50 or 100 they take every year, and if there’s no-one else’s animals up there we’re going to be taking the full hit from wildlife.

R1 The hill’s bad at the moment.

R2 Especially since they’ve introduced the sea eagles up there. I know the bird people swear blind that they’re not taking them but we know for a fact, it’s got to be something, it’s a bit of a coincidence they introduced the eagles and then our lamb percentage plummeted.

R1 We’re actually buying replacements for [inaudible] can’t even breed enough females to sustain the hill.

R2 Even between marking the lambs to weaning, we’re still losing about 30% after that.

I And you think it’s eagles that are taking them, or foxes?

R1 Foxes wouldn’t take anything that age.

R2 Unless there’s something else. They’ll take the odd ones the foxes but there’s actually guys up there monitoring the foxes and shooting them. There’s keen local guys up there quite often but no-one can shoot the eagles. [area 5], and it comes down towards [area 6] as well, that’s the area we’ve had sheep up there. From [area 4] right the way round.

R1 The basin of [area 7] is the left-hand side, the right-hand side is all [area 4] ground.

I But tourists come here partly because of the sea eagles?

R1 Partly, I don’t think it makes a massive amount of difference.

R2 I think the biggest push for the tourists was hearing about a lot of the movies happening here, and that’s been a big draw.

R1 You always see sea eagles coming across here daily, every other day anyway.

R2 This is the top of [area 7] here, the end of the road, and basically [inaudible] Our land, the [area 7] side is from here, our sheep can go right the way round and down here. We gather round Loch [1].

R1 Really just the top [inaudible] then there’s a lower flock which you put out to the hill at a certain time of the year. There used to be everybody else’s sheep on the hill, now we’re the only ones.

R2 [person 5] obviously bought over that place, [person 5], he died. An incomer from Glasgow came up and bought the croft but it’s been more of a hobby for him.

R1 Equally, when the hill’s so bad, there’s not much of an incentive to put sheep out there.

R2 He said I’m not putting any more sheep up the hill there to die. The eagles, there’s no doubt about it, we [inaudible] up there at one point.

R1 We used to have over 1000 head of sheep altogether, but now we’re down to 700. Most of that hit has been on the top hill.

R2 Every year it gets less and less.

R1 And that’s with us buying replacements as well as keeping every, it shows it’s not really sustainable. In fact we would give up on the hill but for two things, there’s a township away wintering scheme which pays for 200 lambs being wintered away, so that’s pretty good about £4000 worth of away wintering covered.

R2 Also, in order to claim on that land as far as your subsidies are concerned, you have to show that you’re working it. If you’re not putting livestock out there you shouldn’t be claiming on it.

R1 To be honest, when is the Department ever going to set foot out there?

R2 But that’s the law, you’re meant to be working it if you’re claiming on it, which we are, we still put sheep up there but it’s a bit demoralising.

I Do you think if more people put more sheep on there then it wouldn’t be quite so [inaudible]

R1 I would think so, yes.

R2 We still hear occasionally about reducing the stock, but there’s never been so few. My dad said when he was younger there were thousands of sheep up that hill.

R1 Every croft had their sheep up on the hill, at certain times of the year anyway.

R2 And they were up there checking on them quite often.

R1 That’s different because the amount of work you have it’s not possible to go up and check like they used to.

R2 We go up with feed blocks in the winter, there’s quad bikes nowadays as well, you can just nip up there. We’ve got a track halfway up which makes a huge difference.

R1 This is along with loads of other improvements we do, we lamb the gimmers indoors for instance to get a better lambing percentage, that was never done in the past. All these things we do to try and help boost, we scan them, we never used to scan, take the twins out, feed them if they’re well [inaudible] here and getting fed. All these things are done to try and improve…

R2 And yet it’s still just not [inaudible] They are having the lambs but they’re just dying off.

R1 Because they’re there at scanning time.

R2 One of the eagle guys I was talking to was adamant that they only take the dead lambs. I said, do you think it makes any difference to an eagle if it’s 1500m above looking down if it’s alive, sleeping or dead. In fact, [person 6], he had photographic evidence of sheep being attacked by an eagle, one had to be put down, huge gouge marks on its back. So if it’s taking on sheep lambs are not going to stand a chance.

R1 It’s difficult because they all want proof of that kind of thing. We’re in a sea eagle management scheme, which is not a compensation scheme, it’s £1000 a year but if you said you can have £5000 or no eagles I’d still say take away the eagles please.

R2 I remember seeing someone online who said, why do you think they got rid of them in the past, they weren’t daft, they knew exactly what was taking their lambs.

I Are there other things that other people are doing or likely to do that might affect what you’re doing, other interactions that we should be aware of? You’ve got this neat deal to get the feed from the distillery and so on, I think there are more people want to make gin and beer and all sorts of things based on yesterday’s event, is that more of an opportunity for you and for others or it’s just something else out there?

R1 If another distillery started up and there was draff available that’s quite good.

R2 Our biggest concern though is these biomass burners burning off the draff. We’ve been hearing about this starting on the mainland.

R1 Or anaerobic digesters is the other one, that’s what they use them for at the moment. Because we’re getting this feeding tariffs we’re not affected by this fortunately on [area C], but lots of people around Scotland are up against, they just can’t get the draff from the distilleries because now the draff is bought by these huge companies, which get feeding tariffs, it’s insane to me.

R2 I’m for renewables but that doesn’t make sense to me.

R1 The government’s giving them feeding tariffs for generating this gas, is that how they do it, they create gas from anaerobic digesters.

I But you’ve got to be quite big I think.

R1 Yes, it’s huge scale, they’ll take the whole lot from a distillery.

R2 And it’s a hugely important part of our farming, having a good supply of draff, without it we’d never be able to keep going.

R1 Or they put the price up so crazy high as well that it doesn’t become…

R2 For us at the moment draff is really cheap feed for us.

I And there’s plenty of it?

R2 It’s more if we’re paying for the haulage, that’s the biggest part of it.

R1 Yes, every distillery is different..There’s one in [area 8], and there’s a bit of draff produced down in [town 2] from the brewery. It’s quite a small-scale thing, bins worth of it. I don’t think anybody in [town 2] would be too happy if we went down there trying to take any of that so it’s best just to leave it for them.

R2 [Distillery 1] is vital for us.

I If somebody started off an anaerobic digester to get rid of the waste in [area C] that would be bad news for you?

R1 We’ve discussed it with many other farmers but we just wouldn’t tolerate it. It would be blocking the roads.

R2 Virtually every crofter up here would be…

R1 And you wouldn’t have a shortage of people willing to put a tractor on the road either, it just wouldn’t be tolerated. You couldn’t have it, one company coming, it… It’s so far past the level of what’s acceptable.

I What about willow or coppice willow for a biomass?

R1 Fine, they can burn that all they want. Some people grow that and then they harvest it.

R2 I still don’t see how that makes sense but…

R1 If you’re thinking of wet ground it probably does. They have a combine harvester with a really aggressive chopping system that mulches it up and fires it into a trailer.

R2 As far as being the best way of getting your land profitable, I…

R1 It would be hugely expensive equipment and it would only tend to work if you own a big scale, or loads of neighbours that were looking to join in.

I I presume you’d need quite a lot of people to have a biomass, somebody who would…

R1 That as well. That’s just talking about equipment to chop it down, rather than the actual.

I The UK government is saying they’re going to pay, this is for England and Wales, and they’re going to be paying farmers in future for doing environmental things only. If that was adopted in Scotland, and I don’t suppose it will be, and they started paying crofters to manage the environment, would there be any incentive of actually lambing your sheep if you’re using sheep just as a way of managing grass so that you can manage biodiversity?

R2 You mean like these estates just being basically tick collectors? That would go against the grain a bit. Our whole life we’ve been…

R1 That’s the problem, what’s logical, logical would be to take the easiest thing to look after your land, maybe a wedder or whatever and you’ll maybe buy them in, someone’s lambs and finish them that way on the grass, put some kilos on them, but it doesn’t seem…

R2 The sheep down in [area 9] they do a fantastic job. They have good percentages down here and if it wasn’t for that we wouldn’t be doing it.

R1 It’s [inaudible] to your land as well, the better the land the [inaudible]

I It sounds like that’s not an attractive option.

R1 The whole point of, you’re farming…

R2 It is a business at the end of the day, you’re trying to make the most profitable way of running it, but…

R1 It wouldn’t seem right to me.

I Is there anything you wanted to say about resilience, about interactions that I’ve not picked up on?

R1 I think we do feel, generally speaking we’re lucky because we have [inaudible] but we do feel vulnerable to too heavy a change in subsidy structures. Sometimes you think maybe time to think of another career.

I The subsidies sound like they’re much more influential in your thinking than say worrying about climate change or [inaudible] taking over ?

R1 Climate change I think is very important to everyone but to my job it’s the…

R2 Governments are always so slow to react to the climate issues. Even with plastic, it seems like everybody’s talking about problems with plastic, the government doesn’t seem to be doing anything about it at all. It always amazes me, it can’t be that difficult to change some rules there.

I Is that an issue for you guys with all the bales covered in plastic?

R1 We don’t have bales so we can be a bit smug about this one.

R2 We do pit silage. We reuse the plastic again over a crop.

R1 We use plastic but not on a fraction of the scale, bale is terribly wasteful.

R2 I think most of the locals just burn it.

R1 Someone said is it any worse to burn it than to bury it in landfill.

End of transcript