Alan Dickinson

Alan works for the National Farmers' Union as the Group Secretary covering the Staffordshire Moorlands and is based in the local office in Leek. He comes from a farming family in Northumberland and used to shear sheep for a living. He now owns a small farm of twenty-five acres, renting a further thirty acres at Rushton Spencer four miles north of Leek. In this second part of the interview, Alan and Christine Gregory discuss the intensification associated with dairy farming and the effects on the environment.

Part Two. Intensification

CG: One of the first things you were talking about was intensification and that on the one hand people have been understanding the loss of species, our pollinators and farmland birds amongst others, and it is right that intensification is some of the causes, and we have lots of issues where we need to start thinking about land as something other than food production, because for example we need our uplands for carbon lock-up and also as flood prevention…

AD: We could easily sort it out, stick a load of spruce, fir trees on it, that's the best way to sort it. But no one would like that would they? It stops the floods, gets all the carbon gone. They're chopping all those trees down up at Flash there and to me, most of that ground was covered in trees. As a farmer, you might never understand, but a nice area is a good farming area. You look at what is productive. The moorland out there, waste of time. You can't keep stock on it, doesn't carry one sheep per five acres. You want five sheep on one acre. It's bred into you that you must produce and you must improve and you must get better, and that's not being intensive, it's just bred into you, into ninety-five percent of farmers anyway. And those bits, yeah plant them with trees as far as I'm concerned, you can have forest walks.

CG: What about the notion of biodiversity, because there are certain species that will do quite well in alien landscapes, conifer woodlands, not many, but that is not going to do much for our pollinators, it's not going to do much for certain breeds of birds or mammals, they cannot flourish and thrive there. What's your view about some sort of partnership with landowners and farmers and the conservation movement that is looking at issues like increasing biodiversity and increasing opportunities for pollinators to flourish, because in the end we will all be affected by this including farmers. Do you think there is enough dialogue between conservationists and farmers?

AD: I totally agree and I think you'll find every farmer agrees as well, but the worry with most farm businesses is making a living. And yes, it'd be great to do everything flowery and nice and all the rest of it, but that doesn't as a rule pay the bills. I've got one customer up at Flash who tells me ninety percent of his income is from farm subsidies and environment schemes. To my mind personally, in some ways, he shouldn't be farming, he shouldn't be in business, 'cos he can't stand on his own two feet. Ten

percent of his income is from his stock. He's living on handouts like the person who is on the dole and getting housing benefit and everything else. And then he's got some nice walls, put it on their grant schemes.

CG: I completely see where you are coming from with that, but surely conservation management doesn't involve no work. Sometimes it does, but there are times when it doesn't as well. So, couldn't we start thinking about landscapes differently, like what's the kind of constructive input that upland farmers can put in that does involve them with proper work, but they actually see a different produce which isn't animals, isn't food?

AD: Some of the schemes I think personally were great, one of the ESA schemes in environment sensitive areas. People got paid for putting walls back up. Brilliant, they've been there for centuries most of them. They had a great purpose. In some areas I understand, the main reason was they gathered up the stones so they could have some grass. You know, areas were so stony, 'let's put them in a pile, oh I may as well put them up in a wall'. I think, I understand that's what they're for. And also, they're shelter, good for the livestock, I think they look fantastic, they last forever compared to putting up a post and rail or wire fence up. So, people were paid to put those back up again. People were getting grants on putting new hedgerows in. Okay, a lot of hedgerows were lost, but to be fair that was on the encouragement of the Government of the other day. They were paid to take hedges out. They had a good reason why though, people were hungry, and I think a lot of people do forget where it all started. The nation was starving, when you hear of people who were on rationing and things. I wouldn't like to be in that situation.

CG: Do you feel that in the NFU you're up against the other large regulating bodies? Do you work with farmers who've been challenged over pollution?

AD: Yes, it's a major issue. Talking to someone the other day and you have your grass and you chop it, you put it in a big pile and you squash it down. And this liquid comes out of this lovely grass, which is perfectly safe, you could eat it yourself. And then you get the grass effluent which is five thousand times more toxic or whatever than some real nasty things. Yet cows will still drink it, but you put it into water and it'll kill all the fish and everything. It is strange, you've got a natural product, but you mess with it a bit and then it becomes very lethal and dangerous. And likewise, the cow muck and the slurry are very dangerous as well and I do think it's been one of the worst things around has the slurry, 'cos it is so dangerous. You can put it on and then you get the flash flood and off it goes.

AD: In this area we were in a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone (NVZ). We put in to get removed from it and it turns out that we should never have been in it in the first place, 'cos the water quality in this area's very, very good. We also tried for the River Weaver and its catchment, which includes the River Dane. The River Dane is perfectly clean, but because it runs into a polluted river body, it's called polluted as well. Now, I don't know

about you, but my limited knowledge of rivers and water, a river doesn't run uphill. So, the Dane is running out into this other water, but it doesn't come back again. But no, if it runs into a polluted area it's classed as polluted as well. European legislation. And part of the reason why the River Weaver's still dirty is because of industry. It has improved a lot over the years and when you look into it further, it's because actually there's not as much industry on the river anymore. The actual impact of farming on that river is very limited, but we get the blame, we get put into an NVZ area, because of everybody else. And the biggest pollutant of all is the waterworks, who dump the sewage and sludge, the sewage and all the muck and stuff back into the river. We had major restrictions on what you had to do and what you could and couldn't do, because we're in this NVZ area which we should never have been in. But we will be reviewed in two years time about whether they try and put us back in it again. I know there's places down there, like Alton and Denstone, they've got a big problem with pollution and they can see once it gets into the ground, it takes a lot longer to be clean. Apparently, it travels faster once it gets into the ground. It can start here and end up being over there very quickly, whereas on the surface it takes a lot longer.

CG: All these nutrients are being highly focused and highly concentrated in areas where they shouldn't be, aren't they, and that is one of the things about intensification, you've just got vast quantities of materials that are becoming more and more dangerous?

AD: To be honest a lot of them now are trying to do the injection of the slurry which slows it down from escaping, you are putting it into the ground a little bit and it's a slower release, it lasts longer. So, people are trying to do things better.

CG: With all these conflicts, it's like firefighting. It sounds to me like you're more in a firefighting job working with farmers, because it is perilous, some of this stuff, environmentally.

AD: I can sense you're almost criticising these people with all the slurry, which I understand where you're coming from, but that farmer's trying to use that slurry so he has to buy less fertiliser, so his grass grows better, so he can reduce his costs, so he can try to make some money or a bit more money. Once again, in industry he'd be called efficient, but he's seen as a major pollutant. But let's forget about the factory that dumped all the stuff in the River Weaver. He was just getting on doing his job and his Managing Director was taking good money home, and probably left the job and that factory's closed down now and their legacy's left behind.

CG: You see, what I've always felt is that surely there has to be space for different sorts of farming. So, you can say that territory over there, that's where we go for full on intensive production to make the food that we need to have, but how can we support the people who don't work so intensively, but who retain other aspects of the environment that are of high value.

AD: The way you have it, if your idea of that's a good farming area where it can cope with all the extra nutrients, let's put all the good farmers there. But round Leek we have some brilliant farmers and I keep saying to them, 'why don't you just sell up and go down to Stafford somewhere where you could be self-sufficient, you'd get all that cow muck, you could put it on the land, you could grow your maize, grow your whole crop', but this is home. They don't want to go from here 'cos they love where they live. They would be better suited being in those good areas, just like what you're saying. But they don't want to move, they want to stay. They're scrappling and fighting round this area to get that extra land. When a bit comes up, they'll want it. Land here is more expensive than a lot of good areas. Supply and demand. They're not making any more of it and the people want it to farm. Some have got money, you know. A lot of land is being sold in this area that they haven't got to borrow the money for. They've had the money in the family and they want to go and get it. I can always remember a bank manager years ago telling me he had a guy who came to him and said 'I've written a cheque out. Been to this auction. Bought this eighty acres, or whatever it was. Paid whatever ridiculous amount of money for it. It was wet and boggy and horrible land. He paid about four times what it was worth' and he said 'I've driven past that land for fifty-eight years and I decided I was gonna have it one day, and it came on the market so I had it'. He had the money to pay for it. I don't think they'd tell you themselves why they want it, 'cos I asked him.

CG: In terms of generations, do you see young farmers coming through who've got ambitions to be organic, sustainable and low impact farmers?

AD: There's not enough income and they end up having to have another job. You don't have to be necessarily intensive but you have to have enough stock and enough whatever to create an income. I mean it's like for me, I've got eighty sheep, I've got a hundred and fifty lambs, and at the very beginning I thought 'if I get seven and a half thousand pounds for those lambs, that'd be alright', and then I started thinking 'oh they might be worth a bit more'. Then the prices started dropping and I thought I might struggle to get that. Seven and a half thousand might sound like a fair bit, but if you saw my expenses, if I break even, I'll be doing well. Like I say, it's an expensive hobby. So, thank God I've got this job. If I was relying on my income from that, it would've been hell. Why shouldn't someone be able to survive on twenty-five acres of land? If everybody had twenty-five acres and could make a living, I think we'd have nice countryside.

CG: It's what you just said a little while ago, you thought that actually we would have a healthier countryside and probably things ticking over a lot better if we had the middle size operators. Much more of them and maybe some small operators as well. Whereas now, it's kind of these terrible poles between what you call hobby farmers and the big farms.

AD: The big farm always gets the criticism, but there's some very good big farmers, as well, who've done masses for the environment. You know they lay fields in fallow.

There's always this argument that the big one 'well he can afford to', but he's still got a lot of expense. He's either had to buy that land or he's had to rent it, so he's still got the same expense on that acre whether he's got two hundred or two thousand. Yes, he's hopefully got the economies of scale, because he's got perhaps a bigger tractor, which can cultivate more land, if he's on arable or something. And yes, his amount of time's spread over a big area and all the rest of it, but it's not always guaranteed that they make more money, because if he's then got to have the bigger equipment, the cost of it is frightening. You're talking three hundred thousand pounds for a combine now. If you're selling grain at a hundred pound per tonne, he needs to cut a hell of a load of tonnes to pay for itself. In fact, I don't know how the numbers work out. Ok yes, he gets his subsidy, but it has become almost important and there's a big worry that now he won't be paid on time because of the big problems the RPA have had, the Rural Payment Agency.

CG: Is it the case that dairy farming can't function without being intensive?

AD: No, I don't think it has to be intensive. Whether you'd say semi-intensive I don't know, but once again, what are we classing as intensive? To me the intensive one is the cows are in the shed all the time, the grass is chopped every day and brought into them. They bring the feed into them and they take the muck out. I'm a great believer in the cow walks the field and eats the grass itself and leaves some of the muck behind and it's spread over an area, organically if you like, and then the cow comes back in and is milked. Some farmers they keep them in overnight, but she goes back out through the day. It's good for the cow's health, she gets walked, her feet get worn down. So, there's lots of farms, certainly in this area that I wouldn't call intensive, definitely not.

CG: In terms of managing to maintain a certain balance where wild creatures can manage as well, do you think you need a certain acreage for that to be possible on a dairy farm?

AD: Once again, it all depends on the personal situation. If that farm had been handed down over the generations so there's no mortgage, there's no rent, you can survive on a lot less than someone who's paying two hundred pound an acre. We have some small farms and they seem to do fairly well, but I don't know their financial situation. Have they had a regular two hundred thousand pounds left to them from the aunt? Obviously, that makes life a lot easier doesn't it?

CG: Do you work with tenant farmers?

AD: There's not many tenants around here, that's the great thing about people round here, most of them own their own farm. They might rent a bit extra as well, but they own their own land. There are different pressures on tenant farmers. I would say somebody who owns the farm, times get hard, they can sell five acres, keep them going. My brother on a rented farm, he gets hard-up he's out. There's no leeway. So, it is different pressures.

CG: In terms of the Peak Park, Natural England has said we've lost 97% of our species-rich hay meadows from the 1960's onwards, and most of the remaining ones seem to be down here, in this corner. Do you think they are worth keeping?

AD: Most of them get kept because the farmer, just the way he goes on, doesn't really have any great pressures. I know personally, in the morning if I go out with a knapsack sprayer, I'm not killing species-rich meadows, but I am killing thistles and docks and everything because every bit of ground they're covering, it's not covered in grass. And these species-rich meadows, a lot of them have not got a lot of feed value compared to the grass, which is why they've been lost, because people are trying to become more efficient, produce more feed to feed the animals, so they don't have to buy extra feed in the winter. It hasn't been done to get rid of the species-rich meadows; it was done to get better grass, better feed, better silage or hay to feed the animals to reduce their cost. That's why like I said before, I hate this you chop the grass and you bring it in to feed the cows and then you cart the muck back out again. Not the cows do it themselves. But you know, there are one or two in this area, not many. There are two or three probably locally doing that and you know, massive costs.

CG: Apparently, it takes fifty years once you've ploughed-up a hay meadow and planted rye grass for it to naturally re-establish itself through the wind.

AD: I can remember us having all meadows and you had the long tall grasses here and in the bottom was about this much. You just didn't get any crop at all off it. You plough that up and you put rye grass in, it was thick all the way down. You call it intensive but it's actually efficient. It's making the best use of that land. That's why it's such a big divide of who's right and who's wrong. And like in one of these SSSI areas where we had problems with Natural England, and they put a bit of muck on and a bit of fertiliser, nothing intensive and we went down one day and it was swarming in butterflies. There were birds swooping over, and then next door there's a guy who was paid a lot of money in one of these schemes and a lot of it was this broadleaf weed which just chokes everything out. He hadn't had anything on it for about ten months or something and he's getting paid large amounts of money for doing nothing and even the butterflies weren't flying onto that. They preferred to be on the other. It wasn't even semi-intensive, it was just well farmed land. There was enough in that to support things, 'cos the ground nesting birds wanted to be on it, because the butterflies were on it. One feeds the other. They didn't want to go on that other stuff, which a lot of ecologists would say was great, 'cos there was no muck put on it. Muck is a great thing, especially the old fashioned muck, like the bedding muck. It goes on the ground, the frost breaks it up, the birds start turning it over, 'cos the worms have come up through it. One feeds the other. You've got no fertility in the soil, nothing survives. It's a complex picture and who has the answers, I'm not sure.