

## **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 third part of the interview, Alan talked to Christine Gregory about the subsidies and schemes that are available to farmers to encourage environmentally friendly farming in the Peak District.

### **Part Three. Subsidies**

CG: There are lots of different ways to earn money from land, aren't there? Whether it's running holiday cottages or doing forestry or wind turbines or sustainable farming, but I get a real feeling from you, that you do not approve and that you think a lot of other people do not approve of getting a subsidy for keeping land pristine.

AD: They're getting big lumps of money to do nothing when they would've been doing nothing anyway. The old argument has been, do you pay the man to change his farming practice to make it nice or do you pay the man who's doing it anyway? Who deserves it more? One man's ripped the land to shreds and now you're gonna pay him a lot of money to put it nice and the other one says 'well I've been doing it forever and he gets all that money'.

AD: I've got one customer up at Flash who tells me ninety percent of his income is from farm subsidies and environment schemes. My mind personally, in some ways is 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 in 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. 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 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: What choices have the government had?

AD: It's like on the environment schemes, we were operating a system where you could join any time of the year, on the ones that finish now. Join them whenever you want. Then it turns out, they should've only been once a year. All schemes should've started on the first of January. So, then they changed the payment dates from June or whatever. You were paid I think, June and six months later or whatever. Now some people had to wait a long time before they got a payment because they didn't fit in with how they'd had to start paying them. And the Government have been penalised, major penalties from Europe. Why did no one ever read the small print and you know, that's cost you and me a lot of money in our taxes, being paid to Europe. The new schemes are very difficult to get into. Most people won't bother and it seems that the old schemes, anyone could try and get into the entry level one. They were fairly simple and straightforward. Now it's only selected areas, certain places, you've got to have something special to offer before you can even apply. So, some will get probably very rich out of it and others won't. So, have we moved forward again? Probably not. Some are getting paid in what they call SSSI areas, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, which people can't do anything with anyway. So, you can't do anything with it, but they're going to pay you not to do anything. But their argument for that of course as well, 'cos I've had quite a few customers affected by that, they've bought land and then a few years later the Government, well I'm not sure who it was that put them into these SSSI areas, didn't really find out who owned the land, didn't really tell anybody or so the farmers tell me. Now their land, they bought at three thousand pound an acre many, many years ago, is probably worth a quarter of that because they can't do anything with it. But they weren't warned about it or given the option to consult against it. On the Leek moors where it's SSSI, they were trying to save the black grouse. Well, the black grouse still died, so it didn't serve its sole purpose, but they still kept it in the SSSI. And there's some areas where they're saying it's so bad, they have all this scale of improving stagnant land and so some of them have been told 'you can't put any stock on at all, because it's so overgrazed' or whatever. Well, is no stock at all going to do it any good?

CG: I suppose it's got to be on a case-by-case basis, but round here Julia has been telling me that the rates being paid to upland farmers has collapsed, hasn't it? On the ESL where you were potentially getting £64 per hectare, you are now talking about £26 under the new scheme?

AD: On a new scheme it's more or less on an invite basis only now, whereas before anybody could apply in an upland area. So, people won't bother for what it is. So, then all the work that's gone in to try to improve things is kind of then lost in a lot of ways. There's so much still unknown about the new schemes as well.

CG: We've just had a right ear bashing, in a good way. It's amazing the work Claire has done on these applications for walkways, but she was mainly talking about these applications for 'stewardship'. She was saying no one will both any more, because it is just so difficult. Is that your experience?

AD: Yeh, there's just so much loopholes within it and it's very difficult to work around. You know, 'cos people have a farm, so one's gotta fit in with the other and they just don't seem to. And I think the people devising the schemes have no idea, no real farming knowledge. A university professor's not gonna really understand what needs to be done at the other end, does he? That's where it all falls down.

CG: Was the other scheme better?

AD: I had someone on the Higher Level Stewardship whereby they're told 'you can put no stock on until end of June and then you can put as many as you want on for three months and then you've gotta take them off again'. Well, most of these areas the grass gets so long by end of June, it's wasted, 'cos all they do is go on, they can't eat it 'cos it's so long and they trample it and then they go round trying to find something to eat and probably make a bigger mess than ever, instead of being put on perhaps less in numbers early on so they can eat that early grass and keep on top of it so it's... Fellow wildlife don't wanna kill wildlife. You know, we had one in one of these SSSIs where they say 'oh the cows'll trample the ground nesting birds'. No, they don't, they step over them. They don't wanna, the birds will make sure they don't, they will attack 'em and everything, you know. Somewhere's overgrazed and they said that it was too dense, well they've gotta have the bare bit to nest in so then they can run into the cover for safety. It's no good letting that get long otherwise they've got nowhere to nest, and there's a lot that just don't quite seem to understand. Like there's been a cry many times that people are farming a certain way, there's lots of wildlife, birds and all the rest of it, then they come in, 'right, you've gotta do this that and the other', which was totally different to what was being done. Well, they got all the wildlife, flowers and everythin' because of how they're farming. You go and change it, you lose that. The farm didn't get to where it is because of stewardship, it's because of the way it's been farmed for many years. There's a few where there were quite rare orchids and 'oh you've gotta fence this off so the animals can't eat it'. Well, it's there because..., and then it gets choked out, because there's nothing to eat around it and help it survive.

CG: It's understanding this sensitive interrelationship between things, isn't it? It's like changes in regimes have consequences that people cannot really foresee, but grazing regimes are terribly complicated, aren't they?

AD: At one time I used to work on a farm in Scotland. It was on the Scottish Northumberland border, top of the Pennine Way. The shepherd there, he used to go in the morning, he'd chase the sheep out to a certain part of the hill and the sheep used to slowly drift back in again. At night-time he chased them back up onto the other side of the hill to make them graze it, those bits they didn't really wanna graze, but it kept it going. He had certain families lived on certain parts of the hill and you put that sheep back and it went straight to that bit of hill, because that's where all of its family were.

AD: Under the past environment schemes it was always, you couldn't cut all your hedges at once one year and you had to do them at different heights. Well, it was always traditionally you cut your hedge every year, 'cos you keep it low, it keeps dense and thick at the bottom. You let it grow tall, it grows tall and spindly. There's no cover for the wildlife. My garden hedge, I cut it last night which is probably a fortnight quicker than what I should do, 'cos now they're saying birds nest on the 31st of August which I've never known. That's what the Government are saying. Farmers now can't cut their hedges 'til the 1st of September. They've jumped it back a month. There's certain things where you're planting oilseed rape or whatever quite early, they did the hedges to save money and now they can't do it. And I cut my hedge last night, 'cos it was growing onto the road and there was a bird's nest in there. It was cut last year, but a bird had put a nest in there. It's not used anymore, so I'm not cutting it too soon because that bird's gone. I've never heard of any bird nesting in August, but now they're saying the cycle's all changed.

CG: Do you think we can open up a better dialogue between the conservationists and farmers?

AD: If you can get A and B together to make C then yeah. But we've got, like in anything, some people set in their ways and some people are open to doing things, and yes, they all mix great, but some just won't, 'cos they don't want to know. There's a lot of resentment on both sides of the other side and probably neither understands why they resent the other side. You know, some people just don't like the walkers or the people who interfere in what they do, because well 'this is mine and I don't want to know', and others can see why it's there and listen. You know, if you don't listen, you'll never find out, will you?