

SINGLE PAYMENTS

Poots continues to deliver

WRITTEN BY
RICHARD HALLERON

It's turning out to be decent back end for agriculture: good prices, reasonable weather and now we have the news that the single payment budget is to be increased by almost five per cent.

All we need now is for Boris Johnson to strike the right trade deal with Brussels and everything will be rosy in the garden. And, even where Brexit is concerned, there is now genuine hope that the mood music is changing for the better. Politics is supposed to be the art of the possible. This is a message that seems not to have been lost on our farm minister Edwin Poots. Since taking office, he has been a breath of fresh air, in terms of his addressing the challenges that confront production agriculture. He said from the get-go that he wanted to support the farming industry. And, in my opinion, he has kept his word in spades. The minister said that he would get a strong Covid support deal for agriculture and he managed to do just that. He, essentially, did away with the Greening requirement, as part of farmers' single payment obligations and he has been very proactive in terms of getting a reasonable ammonia settlement for those farmers wishing to expand their businesses on a sustainable basis. And now we have the tremendous news, where the single payment budget is concerned.

Back in February, when Edwin Poots took office, very few people were thinking the Co Down man would have been able to come through with a fraction of these policy developments. This assertion has nothing to do with his abilities to get the job done but rather a reflection on the stasis that had so characterised the workings of the Stormont Assembly and Executive up to that point. Another, very positive, facet of Edwin Poots' approach to the job in hand is his ability to work constructively with the members of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (AERA) Committee on a constructive basis. Let's hope this continues to be the case. Meanwhile, the challenges facing agriculture in Northern Ireland will continue to change. Coping with life in a post-Brexit world truly stands out in this regard. No doubt, Edwin Poots will be given the job of putting in place a new, long-term support strategy for the farming and rural sectors. It will be interesting to see what he comes up with.

Brussels Notebook

It looks like a Brexit deal will finally be struck

The smell of fudge is still in the air

Back when he was the Daily Telegraph correspondent in Brussels – and Ray MacSharry was the EU farm commissioner – Boris Johnson often said you could smell the fudge from EU negotiations, as deals were cooked up. Thirty years on the smell of fudge is still in the air, but this time over Brexit Johnson is one of the chefs mixing it. Fudges reflect the reality that in any negotiation neither side gets all they want. Over Brexit the fudge is to find a formula that will allow both the UK and EU to claim they stuck to their principles. What is clear as the discussions continue is that the 'over ready' trade deal Johnson promised at the start of the year is not one the menu. He believed then that through bluster and the buoyancy that came from a massive election victory he could bounce the EU into a trade deal similar to the one it has with Canada. That was never on the cards, because the UK is seeking a deal that goes far beyond trade. It wants, for example, mutual recognition of qualifications



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and continued easy access to the EU for people. The UK also has the very real problem of a land border here with an EU member state. It took time for the penny to drop, but even the biggest Brexit enthusiasts in the government must know now that a loose Canada style deal is not going to deliver the other things it wants. The Brexit negotiations are in the endgame and it would be a massive surprise now if they ended with no deal. That would not be part of the fudge recipe. The discus-

sions which took place this week are finally real negotiations. Michael Gove began the talks in Brussels by insisting that the UK would press ahead with its Internal Markets legislation that would see it break the Withdrawal Agreement. Wearing a mask for the pre-talks photograph Gove must have been tight lipped behind it. He has reportedly suggested that a no deal outcome would be staring into an economic abyss. As expected the EU responded by beginning legal

action against the UK over this issue, but on the road to a deal this is a largely irrelevant issue. The focus is on a deal being agreed by the EU Heads of State summit in mid-October. Both sides probably have their speeches written to claim they stuck to their principles and that common sense and economic reality prevailed. That would be good news for agriculture as one of the sectors with a lot to lose from a no deal outcome. With any luck a deal with the EU would make it a lot harder for the UK to import cheap food that meets neither UK or EU-27 standards. There will be holes in any agreement reached and a lot of issues will be kicked down the road into new transition phase. An example this week was that there could be a three year transition over fishing rights – one of the key red line issues for the UK government. The mood music is that a deal will be struck. There are no longer orchestrated leaks from either side. The next phase will be senior diplomat to senior diplomat horse trading behind closed doors, with politicians giving them scope to cut a deal. There

will be some political grandstanding, but by mid-October both sides will probably make speeches claiming victory, having agreed not to contradict each others. The Brexiteers of the Conservative party may not like what will be agreed, but with the economy in free-fall and the UK facing the worst economic recession in Europe there will be little they can do to unpick the deal. This could all be wrong, as is always possible with any negotiation, but logic is now pointing to a deal. Would it have been possible without coronavirus overhanging the negotiation? – probably not. Will it be better than the deal negotiated by Theresa May? – again probably not, but that will not be admitted. Above all will it set a clear path to a more certain future? That does look likely, although there will be plenty of issues set to one side for further negotiation. The scale of the challenge may be bigger and the stakes higher, but the negotiation is no different to the brinkmanship of successive CAP reforms or climate change deals. Fudge is once again the only item on the menu.

YOUR LETTERS

Unlock your soil's potential with NI lime

The environment, soils and soil nutrients are key factors in the Agri-Food Strategy Board's 'Going for Growth' report, on the back of which 'A Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy for Northern Ireland' was created.

The expert working group concluded, among other items, that less than 10% of NI farmland has up-to-date soil analysis, and 64% of NI soils are not at optimum pH, leading to grass utilisation that is significantly below optimum levels.

Improving the health of NI's agricultural soils is the central focus of the strategy, as healthy soils require good management to ensure that

our farmland delivers its potential for greater profitability and better environmental performance. This report concludes that the first step in improved soil health will be achieved by the appropriate application of lime to optimise the pH of agricultural land.

A key indicator of soil health is pH. If soil pH is not at optimal levels (6.5 for arable fields, 6.0 for grassland on mineral soils and 5.3 for grassland on peaty soils) then farmers will not be able to significantly improve yield and will not get the most from applied organic and inorganic fertilisers. It is worth noting that with the logarithmic scale of pH, a value of 5.5 is 10 times more acidic than 6.5. Appropriate liming based

on soil analysis is the key way to address pH deficiencies in soil. Regular liming is an important aid in maintaining productive grass species and legumes, such as ryegrass and clover within diverse swards. Experimental evidence suggests that liming can also have long-term positive effects on overall soil health, leading to increased carbon sequestration, improved soil structure, better soil aeration, better drainage and positively benefiting biodiversity.

There are many penalties associated with sub-optimal pH, including a reduction in the activity of beneficial soil microorganisms which are essential for creating a healthy vibrant soil environment. This, in turn, leads to a reduction in the solubility and

availability of essential soil nutrients and beneficial cations like calcium, potassium and magnesium. Sub-optimal pH can result in a marked effect on yield and quality due to both the nutrient imbalance and aluminium toxicity. It is therefore essential to achieve and maintain your soil at an optimal pH through a 'liming programme' - seen as the most remunerative crop input investment.

Agricultural Lime, in both ground and granulated form, is a controlled and regulated fertiliser in the 1991 Fertiliser Regulations. As well as being 'dual action', providing necessary plant nutrient calcium, it is crucially the chemical 'base' carbonate that neutralises excess +hydrogen ions, producing water and carbon

dioxide.

Ag-Lime and Granulated Lime quality determines its efficacy and benefit. The combination of neutralising value and fineness have a direct impact on its effectiveness in the soil. On the contrary, coarse or out-of-specification materials will do little more than neutralise your bank balance!

In short, the regular application of good quality Ag-Lime or Granulated Lime, produced in Northern Ireland, will ensure that your soil's nutrients remain unlocked. This will have a significant impact on both the efficiency of your fertiliser and the yield of your crop(s).

Gordon Best
Regional Director MPA-NI