

Co-operation, collaboration and reconnection - the new RASE agenda

By Mike Calvert

In the new millennium the Royal Agricultural Society of England has adopted a new style of working to the benefit of rural areas in the UK through its charitable activities. With the countryside facing its biggest changes for 60 years, the challenge of this objective has never been greater than today. Co-operation, collaboration and reconnection are the key words in the RASE agenda for 2004: the constructive management of change in agriculture and rural industries.

Some three years ago the RASE, and the Fellows and the Associates of the Royal Agricultural Societies, pooled their skills and resources to look at issues relevant to the industry.

This group of people represents a huge resource of knowledge, skills and contacts. Many of those involved have already given a great deal to the industry, but are enthusiastic about working together to help develop a secure future for the sector.

Recently this relationship has become more formalised. The new programme of activities started with a meeting to look at the output of the Curry Commission and the response to this from the industry and Defra, including the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food.

The objective was to undertake a balanced analysis of what had been done and what extra action was required to ensure progress was made.

A number of questions arose from this exercise, which were forwarded to the Secretary of State at Defra. Margaret Beckett's detailed response now forms the subject of a further meeting in May to see what progress has been made. The result of this exercise will be made public after that meeting.

Several key issues that were raised are being followed up in various ways at the present time. These included a perception that large scale farming had been largely ignored as a result of the emphasis on niche markets and delivery of public good products. The RASE-led group challenged the credibility of some of the assumptions made about what was required for the industry in areas such as welfare and the environment was questioned. Where the present course was taking us and the loss of critical mass in numerous areas, including research and development, were also serious concerns.

There was a strong feeling that although the concept of change was well understood and being exploited by a few practitioners in the industry, many farmers still did not appreciate the need for change. Where they did, they were not sure what to do about it because of the uncertainty and complexity of the issues. Had the policy makers given inadequate thought to the implications of change in the rural sector as a whole, and the knock on effect of change from one area of rural activity to another?

The group identified the opportunity to develop a much healthier, more varied rural economy over the next ten years in which profitable food production would be the major single activity. This opportunity could be squandered if other appropriate actions are not taken now.

Within this context the RASE and FRAGS group has set up a programme of meetings to look at the 'Constructive Management of Change' culminating in a conference in November at Stoneleigh Park.

This series of meetings will try to help policy makers and practitioners determine what change is likely to occur, and what will affect their area of activity. The meetings will address the effects of the likely changes on competitiveness of UK agriculture, and the opportunities that may be created. They will look at the effect of policy issues and policy delivery on the development of the sector and the new products and services that might be required. The necessary changing of mindsets and attitudes is a thorny issue, as is the need to ensure that the programme delivers something meaningful and is not just a talking shop. The thoughts of the young generation on these issues are also being explored to see if a generation effect could influence the way forward.

The programme has started well, and the conference in November will be a landmark in the development of this relationship.

Within this spirit of working together to help tackle the issues of the future, the RASE has joined a number of other working relationships to help tackle the issues raised in the sector.

Co-operation, collaboration and reconnection; these are key words throughout the Policy Agenda.

The Royal Smithfield Club, the Agricultural Engineers Association and the RASE are working in partnership to develop a series of events to meet the industry's needs over the coming years and have created a joint venture with Haymarket Exhibitions to strengthen the delivery. These relationships, I am sure, will be a precursor to exciting developments across the show sector.

Working together will be a key feature of this year's Royal Show. A Sunday start last year encouraged farmers who could not leave the farm during the working week to come and there is no doubt that this was successful. The first food chain exhibit, the 'Grain Chain', which had 40 organisations working together on a joint programme to demonstrate the food chain to farmers, consumers, policy makers and media was another welcome development.

This joint programme is being further developed this year. Alongside the 'Grain Chain' will be a 'Dairy Chain' in conjunction with the Milk Development Council and the dairy sector, and a frozen pea demonstration with Unilever and the Processed Vegetable Growers Association. Together we are challenging understanding and belief in the production of British food in our large show audiences. They will be supported by other joint livestock exhibits in conjunction with the British Pig Association and the National Sheep Association.

In addition to this there will be the first 'one-stop-shop' exhibition anywhere, of what is available to the farmer in the development of his business over the coming year. All eight English Regional Development Agencies will all be present in a huge display demonstrating examples of best practice from across the country.

They will be supported by the developments spun out of the Curry Commission including the English Food and Farming Partnership, the Food Chain Centre and the Red Meat Industry Forum. LEAF, Farming and Countryside Education (FACE) and Farm Stay UK are just three of the varied organisations involved, which will also include Farmers Markets and a major exhibit and programme of activities on broadband and rural issues.

The role RASE has adopted in bringing this group of diverse organisations together at a single event, is one that is being taking forward in other areas of the Society's work.

FACE was mentioned in the context of the Royal Show. For those who do not know, FACE was established just over two years ago when the NFU and the RASE decided to put their educational resources together to try to improve the delivery of material into schools. Some 45 other organisations have since joined. These range from trade bodies and supermarkets to environmental organisations and levy bodies. This has been an extremely successful venture with the website now having over 1 million hits per month and the penetration at school level having increased dramatically. Further supporters are welcome and the organisation is now looking at how best to restructure to meet the increasing demands put upon it.

Collaboration and co-operation can work and be very effective. They are an important part of the way forward because as an industry working together we can be very effective, individually we do not have the resources to make much impact. At the RASE we are always looking for new ways to work together and if individuals or organisations wish to join in any of our existing activities, or have suggestions for the future, please do not be backward in coming forward.