

Stalham February 2026 Burrows

Challenges for the cereals sector

Farmer Jamie Burrows was almost on home ground when he spoke at Wroxham Barns at the club's 184th annual meeting.

He had spent several pre-harvest holidays with his family just yards from Wroxham Barns. And he found it more than somewhat ironical that on previous occasions he had to pay for his daughters, now aged 10 and 13, to feed calves on rainy day visits.

As chair of the NFU's cereals and combinable crops board, he recognised that the arable sector faced major challenges. After returning home from Harper Adams in 2005, he had become an active member of the NFU – initially at branch level in south Hertfordshire, then eventually elected as chairman of the region's cereal and combinable crops committee.

Almost two years ago, he had become national chair, which had been an even steeper learning curve. He would like the opportunity to build on his experiences to serve a second term because there was much more that had to be achieved.

Although farming about 1,000ha of cereals some 20 miles from London's March Arch, he has recently moved part of his operation to central Norfolk. He had married a Norfolk girl but she had refused to move with him to New Zealand, so he built up a partnership in Hertfordshire.

On a more serious note, Mr Burrows said that individual farmers needed to continue to highlight their pressing concerns on key issues such as the SFI (Sustainable Farming Initiative). He said that between 40 and 80 Labour MPs had been hugely helpful in persuading Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer to increase the IHT limit to £2.5m.

Mr Burrows urged farmers and growers to contact their MP on the SFI issue. "Just explain the financial impact on your business – we know MPs are listening. So give them the facts about your farm and your business," he added. And, you could consider inviting them onto your farm this summer.

Another Defra consultation, which has just closed, on contractual relationships in combinable crop sector had generated some 1,250 responses. This was quite remarkable given that typically around 250 responses were received by Defra.

Mr Burrows stressed that there was a lot more work required to iron some of the inefficiencies and unfairness with some contracts. He was devoting three if not four days most weeks on NFU related business.

He was also highly critical at the lack of joined-up thinking on food policy issues – the closure of the Vivergo plant in Hull last year had been one such example. The consequences of the closure hit so many sectors – obviously cereal growers to those

reliant on a steady source of key by-products like milk producers. Again, he suggested the consequences of that closure, which had been a key demand for duty free access for USA ethanol, had not been fully calculated by government and the Treasury.

Indeed, he now understood that Defra was looking at possible ways to produce more sustainable aviation fuel from crops – which had produced from the Vivergo plant. Little wonder that the NFU was often puzzled by Whitehall's lack of strategic thinking.

In a lively question discussion period, numerous members queried the aims and objectives of the Red Tractor scheme. Mr Burrows argued that maybe the scheme should concentrate its energies on highlighting two key objectives – identifying quality traceable and safe food produced in this country.

Several members highlighted their concerns that the long-established scheme, incidentally launched by former Prime Minister Tony Blair in June 2000, was trying to become too much of a broad-based generic food assurance project.

While a number of more technical issues were raised and discussed, Mr Burrows said that progress was being made, albeit at times at a slower pace than he would have liked.

And certainly in terms of electronic grain passports, which could simplify the movement of cereals and products, he did recognise some very basic issues. In the 21st century it is challenging that some parts of rural Norfolk simply did not have good connectivity for mobiles and wifi, he added.

It was a lively presentation and Mr Burrows certainly demonstrated his detailed knowledge of the range of issues across the various sectors. He was thanked by the chairman, Jonathan Pye, for his making his first visit to the club.

He was presented with a maroon tie, featuring the club's Stalham swan-necked hoe and the foundation date, 1841.

Michael Pollitt