

Few regrets from time as Britain's biggest farmer

by Ewan Pate *farmland editor*

CHRISTINE TACON has stepped down from the role of being Britain's biggest farmer with few regrets and an undimmed enthusiasm for the future of food production.

Mrs Tacon, who was until January the chief executive of Co-operative Farms, told the members of Blairgowrie Civic Trust yesterday that food security had moved belatedly to the top of the international agenda and she hoped to bring her expertise to bear on the problem through directorships of major players in the food industry.

"I would like to be appointed to an FTSE 100 company — 10 of them have no women on their boards at all, and so far I have written to four of them!" she said.

For those who have come across Mrs Tacon during her 11 years in the farming sector, such refreshing frankness will come as no surprise.

She has never been afraid to take a problem by the scruff of the neck and give it a good shake.

"I think if I have any regrets over my time at Co-operative Farms it would be that I didn't make changes for the better quickly enough," she said.

That would not be an obvious criticism to make back in 2000 when Mrs Tacon, an engineering graduate and businesswoman with no experience of farming, took over responsibility for Co-operative Farms and its 55,000 acres of owned and managed land.

At that time the business, which owns around a third of the land it farms, was hemorrhaging cash. The turnover was £43m the year Mrs Tacon arrived but losses were running at £6m.

"I know I was ruthless but big decisions had to be made or there might not have been a farming division left in the Co-operative business," she said.

"In farming terms it is a big player with £65m turnover, but it is a very small part



of the whole Co-operative business with its £15bn turnover," she said.

One of the most controversial decisions was to axe the 4,500-cow dairy enterprise which had been at the heart of the business since its inception in 1896.

"No, I don't regret making that move. I could see then that dairying was moving to bigger units and we had 13 sites, most of which had seen no investment for five or even 10 years. We just weren't in the right place with dairying and the decision was all part of saving the business," Mrs Tacon said.

There was, however, one part of the Co-operative philosophy that she was very keen to resurrect. Farms were originally bought around the UK so that they could supply fresh produce to the Co-operative

Christine Tacon has an undimmed enthusiasm for the future of food production. Picture: Ewan Pate.

Wholesale Society. The Rosemount Estate at Blairgowrie was soon part of the portfolio and remains the Scottish headquarters for the business.

By the inter-war period CWS owned farms and plantations around the world as well as processing facilities, making it an early example of an integrated vertical food supply chain.

By the time Mrs Tacon joined the business in 2000 all of that had been lost and the farms were supplying other supermarkets such as Morrisons with potatoes, but not the Co-op's own stores.

"We had become disconnected.

"We were the only retailer with its own farming business but weren't taking advantage of it," she said.

"We had one big advantage as we invested in building up the links with our stores — we knew we wouldn't be delisted," she said.

"We had to be competitive on price of course but we knew we would be able to keep the business.

"Customers liked the provenance we could offer and the link with our own farms.

"Technology has allowed us to trace potatoes from the shelf right back to the field they came from.

"Our first move was the 'Grown by Us' campaign which still runs.

"We have since added photos of producers on many of the packs and this allows us to acknowledge other farmers who supply our packhouses."

The investment has been considerable and included a packhouse for potatoes at Carnoustie and another for soft fruit at Longforgan.

By 2016 the target is for Co-operative Farms to produce all the apples and potatoes sold in the stores, and around half the strawberries.

In local terms this has involved strawberry production at Rosemount rising from 100 tonnes per year to over 1,000 tonnes over a decade.

Mrs Tacon also leaves other legacies aligned with the Co-operative movement's ethos of social responsibility.

The Habitat Heroes initiative encourages farm managers to encourage endangered or vulnerable species such as, in the case of Rosemount, red squirrels.

The Farm to Fork schools project has brought thousands of children on to farms for structured visits.

Along the way Mrs Tacon has been awarded a CBE for services to agriculture and been chairman of the Oxford Farming Conference.

It is hard to believe that her new career path, however high flying it might be, will take her too far from farming and food production.