

Investing in farming's future

I HAVE read a one-page summary of Prof Sir John Beddington's (plus 400 scientists') three-year study into the Future of Food and Farming. I am now trying to read the full 176 pages.

Often such worthy documents are dramatically simplified by the media, yet in Prof Beddington's own words: "There is no quick fix. There is no silver bullet. The issues are all intimately related and require nothing less than a re-design of the whole food system." Not exactly a catchy headline.

It is up to us to ensure the long list of actions resulting from the study do not disappear. Luckily, Prof Beddington is the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser and it is for all of our sakes he continues to talk about the perfect storm of population growth, improving diet, water shortages, energy shortages and climate change which, together, he fears will create future food shortages.

He is arguing for everyone to take action now: a difficult stance when the food shortages may not impact the current Parliament.

One of his recommendations calls for the EU to reform the CAP to encourage capital investment for the delivery of competitive agriculture and improved sustainability. He includes human capital in this definition.

In Cuba, which had to become virtually self-sufficient in a very short time, with minimal availability of oil, fertiliser and agrochemicals, the best brains in the country went into research on food pro-



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duction, which, with technology, continue to be highly valued professions there.

I believe Prof Beddington is warning us we need to be doing the same. Those businesses investing in Eastern Europe say the biggest barrier to efficient production and expansion is the availability of skilled labour and good management.

At the Co-operative Farms, we have had a management trainee programme for over a quarter of a century. Only in the last two years did we start one specifically for fruit and vegetable production.

When working in any high value crop, good management can make a big difference and the best way to ensure you get good people is to 'grow your own'.

We are launching an apprenticeship scheme to bring new, young entrants into our business to support, and eventually replace, the highly-skilled and dedicated teams we have today.

A number will end up working for other employers later on in their careers: our challenge is to make sure the apprentices pay for themselves as we go along.

The leading edge technology we are using on our farms is highly sophisticated (and valuable), whether it be auto-steer, variable rate application, field mapping and trickle irrigation controlled via a mobile phone.

Health and safety best practice requires us to have evidence that employees have been trained in anything we ask them to do. We want to train our own people and have the next generation ready as the business grows and existing employees retire.

Those leaving school and college today are the very people who can help ensure there are no future food shortages. In order for them to consider coming into agriculture, we need to offer them the opportunity to learn what we do.

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