

Co-op eyes leading food security role



CO-OPERATIVE FARMS will more than double the amount of food it produces to stock its supermarket shelves in the next two years.

It will also develop a dedicated supply chain for its liquid milk, it has been announced.

Christine Tacon, managing director of the farming arm of the Co-op, said the commitment strengthened the business' position as it rose to the challenges of food security.

"I've been preaching this story to farmers for years," she said. "I'm always telling them about food security and the Co-op is in an advantageous position because it's got its own commercial farming business."

Christine spoke to *BF&G* at the launch of the company's ethical operating plan - a dossier of 47 environmental and social objectives covering areas including protecting the environment, tackling global poverty and inspiring young people aims to revolutionise the way the business operates.

Much of the launch focused on the Co-op's commitment to Fairtrade and states that, by 2013, 'if a primary commodity from the developing world can be Fairtrade, it will be'. It also pledges to introduce a scorecard of ethical values to influence the way it selects food suppliers.

Group technical manager Ian Burgess said that the commitment to dairy farmers comes at a much-needed time for the beleaguered sector and should improve animal welfare as well as securing the future for producers.

He said that the first farms to be moved onto milk contracts would be identified later this year.

Lee Woodger, head of the NFU's food chain unit, said the plan contained some very important and valuable initiatives and that UK agriculture would feel that the commitments to Fairtrade were first class - something that everyone would support.

He added that: "As with all retailer initiatives, the devil will be in the detail, but it is good to see the Co-op was finally introducing milk contracts for its dairy farmers and it does seem like an encouraging first step towards developing a sustainable supply chain.

"However, while there are many good things to applaud within the EOP, I do wonder if the lack of further significant references to UK agriculture is a bit of a missed opportunity in terms of commitments to its domestic farmer suppliers which are a significant part of the business."

The co-operative commitments

Here are a few of the farming-related pledges that the Co-op has made:

- To grow the UK farming business
- Extend Plan Bee campaign and address the decline of 'at risk' pollinators
- Reduce water consumption by 10 per cent by 2013
- Extend 'Elmwood' welfare standards from chicken and turkey to pork
- Improve animal welfare standards for dairy cows

Your shout!

Do you supply the Co-op? What do you make of retailer CSR plans?

Let us know by emailing lee.woodger@nfu.org.uk or writing

to Agriculture House, Stoneleigh Park, Warwick, CV8 2PT