

OPINION

Some time off for farmers



CHRISTINE
TACON

IT started in harvest 2001, it was very wet, everyone was behind where they wanted to be, and morale was low in The Co-operative Farms.

Asking if there was anything I could do, I was told it would be a good idea to see for myself how they were getting along.

In order not to stop the flow of work I went from field to field, sitting on the jump seats, and chatted. I now do this every year: it has become one of the most enjoyable parts of my job and by far the most informative.

My chats generally start with how the harvest is going and whether they read our internal newsletter, then progress to when they last got time off and how they are working as a team. It is often just as I am getting out of the cab that 'well there is one more thing' comes up and we end up doing another few trips while I listen and try to understand.

It was in direct response to my first set of harvest visits we instigated a 'no Sunday working' policy outside harvest. Many people told me never knowing their days off not only got in the way of planning any social life, but, more worryingly, for separated families, meant they didn't get to see their children.

Farmers will always want to work when the weather is right, and if rain is forecast for Monday, working Sunday and having Monday off seems the obvious answer, but not if it means their family and friends never see them. The policy hasn't worked perfectly, I never expected it to, but most of our farm employees now get Sundays off.

Harvest is another matter: we

introduced a rule this year that everyone had to have a day off every 14 days (it used to be 21).

This year I came across a lot of employees who had not had these days off, due to a very stop/start harvest, but got half days when the weather closed in. This isn't perfect, but it is an improvement on what often takes place in the industry, where the harvest becomes one long 10-week slog with no time off at all.

So why, with less than 1 per cent of the working population in agriculture, are children on holiday at harvest?

Many people don't realise the reason children are off in July and August was so they could help with the harvest, but this would be illegal now anyway. Some schools are moving to two-week half-terms, I suspect as a response to children being taken out of school anyway to hit off-peak holiday prices.

There is evidence the long summer break is not conducive to a good education, and ideally we should have five terms with holidays no longer than three to four weeks at a time. Now wouldn't this suit us better?

Many of our employees take a holiday in June before we get busy. It would be wonderful if the children could go with them: the last few years we have had our best weather then too. Isn't it about time the agricultural industry put its weight behind a campaign to get the school holidays changed?

Our long-hours culture is a big barrier to people coming into the industry and this would be a step in the right direction.

PS - Bookings are now being taken for the Oxford Farming Conference January 4-6, 2011. The programme and booking form are on www.ofc.org.uk

■ *Christine Tacon* is managing director of the Co-operative Farms, part of the Co-operative Group and the largest farmer in the UK. She is chair of the 2011 Oxford Farming Conference.

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