

Interview with Elin Jones, Minister for Rural Affairs, Welsh Assembly Government.



Elin Jones was elected to the Assembly in May 1999 and served as Shadow Economic Development Minister during the Assembly's first term. Following the Assembly election in 2003, she retained this portfolio until 2006 when she became Shadow Minister for Environment, Planning and Countryside. On 9 July 2007 the One Wales Government was formed and Elin was made Minister for Rural Affairs.

This review has a focus on food, but nonetheless it would be helpful for our readers to understand the full range of your brief. Could you summarise your responsibilities, and perhaps prioritise them?

My responsibilities are wide-ranging and include farming, forestry, food and fisheries in Wales, and my department also ensures that all Welsh Assembly Government policies take account of any rural issues.

High profile issues such as bovine TB, farm subsidy payments, animal disease outbreaks, the promotion of food from Wales, land management, farm business support, fisheries management and plant health including GM crops, all fall within my remit.

In terms of my priorities, ensuring a sustainable future for farming, fishing and the woodland industries is at the heart of all the policies for which I am responsible.

As outlined in the One Wales agenda for government agreed in 2007, my main focus is on the following key commitments:

- Securing a £795million Rural Development Plan for Wales
- A scheme to support new entrants to farming
- A major initiative on local food procurement
- Support for indigenous woodlands, including a tree for all new babies and adopted children, helping to create a Welsh National Forest
- A Strategic Action Plan for the dairy industry
- Securing a derogation for Wales to EU Regulations prohibiting the burial of fallen stock on farm land
- To pursue vigorously the eradication of bovine TB
- Identifying and addressing the particular needs of "deep rural" areas
- Maintaining our commitment to maximum restrictions on GM crops.

Do you perceive conflicts in your portfolio, and how are these resolved? For example, there are perhaps conflicts between conventional and organic farming, and between pastoral and horticultural land use, with each

having implications for sustainability. Also of economic significance are potential conflicts between landscape, tourism and sustainable energy.

In Wales, as elsewhere, there are always competing priorities for land use and sometimes these lead to conflicts. We have to balance the need of landowners to make a living from the land with the expectations of wider society of landowners to maintain the landscape and act in an environmentally-responsible way.

We have to think cleverly about balancing these demands, and my Department has responded with a new agri-environment scheme, Glastir, which will compensate farmers for providing environmental services.

I work closely with the other devolved administrations and UK government, as well as with other Ministers within the Welsh Assembly Government to deal with competing demands on land use in Wales. For example, the Environment Minister Jane Davidson and I have just finished a public consultation on the Natural Environment Framework for Wales, which focuses on managing our environment as a whole rather than focusing on separate parts.

What is meant by the term sustainable farming?

The vision of sustainable farming is an industry that enhances the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of people in Wales. Its success depends on

the public, and governments, recognising the value of the services delivered, whilst supporting a balanced approach to the delivery on the food production agenda, as well as the delivery of other public goods and services.

The new, overarching food strategy for Wales for the next 10 years– *Food for Wales Food from Wales* makes a bold step-change in adopting a broad food system approach to food policy. It brings together many crosscutting issues in the areas of health, food culture and education, food security, environmental sustainability and community development to provide the basis for an integrated approach to food policy.

Can you outline the strategic objectives of the Farming Connect service?

Farming Connect supports the development of farming and forestry businesses, enabling them to remain viable and meet future challenges in a sustainable and innovative way.

It offers one-to-one support, knowledge, expertise, training and advisory services. It offers mentoring and help with the production of a Whole Farm Plan, a business plan for farm and forest enterprises.

Services are tailored to the individual farming business' needs, but include support in areas such as finance, technical, environmental, animal

welfare and diversification and innovation. Many services are fully funded or subsidised by 80%. Farming Connect can help farmers to run their businesses more efficiently and ultimately safeguard the future of the farm business.

Learning new skills and refreshing old ones is vital if individuals are to keep up with changes in the industry, and Farming Connect offers regulatory and vocational training courses and strategic awareness events, as well as keeping farmers up-to-date with the latest know-how.

What reputation does Wales have as a food producer, outside Wales? What is your assessment of this reputation?

Welsh food has a long-established reputation for distinctiveness and quality, making it popular with consumers across the world. Wales prides itself on supplying some of the finest produce in the world. Thanks to our producers, our unique geography, climate and farming practices, Wales boasts a range of high quality foods, from our iconic Welsh lamb and beef to cheeses and Welsh seafood.

Welsh Lamb and Welsh Beef have both been awarded the coveted status of Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) by the European Commission, a status enjoyed by the finest regional products from around the world, such as Parma Ham and Champagne. The PGI badge of authenticity means that only lambs and cattle born and reared in Wales and slaughtered in an approved abattoir can be marketed as Welsh. The stock must also be fully traceable.

Last summer, I launched the European Protected Food Names Initiative, to increase the number of Welsh products eligible for PGI status. The benefits for the beef and lamb sector have been tremendous in terms of consumer and trade recognition both within the United Kingdom but also overseas.

We aim to increase the Welsh share from two products with PGI status to ten over the next two years.

In future, we want Wales to increasingly be seen as a foodie destination, and our Food Tourism Action Plan focuses on ensuring visitors to Wales enjoy food as part of the overall Welsh experience.

Does Wales over or under achieve in terms of converting primary agricultural outputs into high quality branded commodities?

There are always opportunities for food producers to add value to their primary produce by developing high quality

branded commodities, and food producers need to exploit these.

That said, we are a small nation punching above our weight in terms of our production of high quality food. Our lamb and beef are iconic, while our cheese and seafood is up there with the best in the world. We are also gaining a reputation for our innovative food and drink and hospitality sector, led by producers who know their market and develop their products in line with its demands.

Cheese production in Wales is one area in which milk producers are excelling in terms of adding value. Around 80% of the milk produced in Wales is processed into cheese, both for the mass market and the quality market. This year, Caws Cenarth's Golden Cenarth won best Semi Soft cheese, best Welsh Cheese and won the Supreme Champion at this year's British Cheese Awards, beating 903 other cheeses to the title.

The food manufacturing sector in Wales is important. How does your portfolio overlap with others in relation to this sector? What do you consider to be an appropriate role for the Welsh Assembly Government in developing the sector?

There are links between food manufacturing and many Welsh Assembly Government departments other than my own. Our recently published ten-year strategy for the food sector in Wales reflects the cross-cutting nature of food and its importance across all policy areas.

The Department for Economy and Transport, through its business support programmes, has strong links with the sector, as does the Health and Social Services portfolio, particularly in relation to healthy eating and improving wellbeing.

Ensuring that the food we produce does not impact adversely on the environment and our natural resources is the domain of the Environment, Sustainability and Housing portfolio, so again there are links with the sector.

Direct support for the food industry has been provided by the Welsh Assembly Government and European Union through the Processing and Marketing Scheme, part of the 2007-13 Rural Development Plan. To date, the Scheme has committed £25.5million into the food sector in Wales, helping 155 companies to develop their businesses.

While government can help the sector develop, by providing direction and support, it is ultimately up to the

industry itself to fulfil its potential. I think this approach is the most appropriate to ensure the sector in Wales capitalises on its strengths.

Should food producers (whether farmers or manufacturers) in Wales be encouraged to expand their markets outside the UK?

I am committed to the promotion of Welsh food in international markets, and believe that food producers should be encouraged to export where appropriate and possible.

The success of Welsh Lamb exports are well publicised, but we need to ensure that we are able to help the wider food and drink industry take advantage of opportunities both within the UK and abroad. By doing this, we not only raise the competitiveness and viability of our industry, but also promote Wales as a producer of a diverse range of quality products.

We must also remember that we also need food to ensure we can feed the people of Wales. Our new Food Strategy, *Food for Wales, Food from Wales* sets a radical direction for industry and Government, and faces up to the challenge of ensuring that people have access to the affordable and healthy food they need whilst ensuring that it does not impact adversely on the natural environment.

The challenge facing food producers is to increase production to meet the demand from a growing population so that healthy food is available to all, while ensuring our land is sustainably managed. I am confident that the industry can respond positively to these challenges.

What does the Welsh Assembly Government do to support export initiatives, and how is the success of such support measured?

As part of the support we provide to food and drink producers in Wales, we actively help them to access opportunities within both home and overseas markets.

We have close links with food and drink businesses and understand their business needs. We offer a fully funded, detailed export capability review and appropriate guidance to any business wishing to export their product or explore new export markets. When required, we follow this up with market entry advice and support from local in-market specialists, helping those businesses maximise their chances of success.

Hybu Cig Cymru – Meat Promotion Wales, the Welsh red meat promotional

body, has successfully secured new markets for Welsh red meat internationally, including Hong Kong, Singapore and Dubai. It has also developed existing international markets such as Italy and France, to a point where lamb exports alone were worth £109 million in 2009.

The success of export initiatives is measured by the value of deals or contracts secured with overseas buyers. In turn, the increase in business for the producer will have an effect on their turnover, production, and number of employees. These are all elements which we try and measure through our contact with the industry.

How satisfactory is the market structure of UK food suppliers? For example, just as a few big banks have come to dominate the financial sector, is this not also the case with regard to supermarkets and retail food?

The Welsh Assembly Government aims to support the right market conditions to enable fair competition and supports the introduction of a fully independent enforcement body.

I have pressed for the introduction of an ombudsman to intervene where unfair practice is suspected, and have made this view clear to the UK government on several occasions. I am therefore pleased with the recent decision to introduce a "Groceries Code Adjudicator" to monitor and enforce the Groceries Supply Chain Code of Practice.

This is an important step towards the establishment of an arbitrator but I am aware that we could be some way off seeing anyone in that position.

In Wales, we have a diverse range of opportunities for food producers to sell their products. One in five Welsh food and drink products is bought direct from the producer, a statistic of which I am particularly pleased. Food festivals, farmers markets, farm shops and projects like Pembrokeshire Produce Direct have increased opportunities for the consumer to buy direct.

Supermarkets are becoming more aware of the local sourcing agenda and are stocking an increasing range of Welsh products. Through our consumer tracking research, we are able to identify how and where consumers buy Welsh food and drink and work with those retailers we feel are underperforming in this area.

We have a dedicated trade development programme to help companies large and small to engage with the range of retailers we have in the UK. The main

aim is to facilitate the purchase of Welsh food and drink by retailers, and help them effectively manage their relationships with producers.

Access to Welsh seafood in Wales has traditionally been restricted because of the high dependence of the industry on export to Europe. Through the European Fisheries Fund, which has committed £7.4million to the fishing industry in Wales, real progress is being made to address our reliance on the European market. A recent success was the agreement between the South West Wales Fishing Association and Waitrose, which has increased the range of Welsh fish and shellfish in store.

What do you consider to be the greatest challenge for Welsh farmers and food producers over the next decade?

The major challenge ahead is how Wales can maintain its food production potential while at the same time cutting emissions of greenhouse gases.

In 2009, I set up the independent Land Use Climate Change Group to report to me on how the rural sector can respond to climate change in terms of food supply and security, carbon sequestration and renewable energy reply.

The report's emphasis is on maintaining intensive dairy, sheep and beef sectors while diversifying and increasing vegetable crops. In the longer term, the report recommends development of a more radical approach where much of the cattle herd is housed and methane emissions are captured. By 2040, agriculture and land use sectors could make substantial progress to carbon neutrality.

I will be publishing an implementation plan based on the Report's recommendations soon.

A visible example of the effect of climate change on farming today, and one which has featured in the media is its impact on animal health.

Climate change may have a significant impact on new and emerging animal diseases such as Bluetongue and African Horse Sickness, leading to an increase in the need for surveillance by government and increasing vigilance from the farming community.

This increase coupled with other factors will mean that the scope of Government to intervene and support the farming industry to manage endemic animal diseases is likely to become increasingly limited and you will see a more collaborative approach being taken. This is already evident in the way the bovine

TB Eradication Programme in Wales is being taken forward.

However, this will also mean that the farming industry will be relied upon to come up with solutions for tackling many other animal diseases that do not have implications for human health. As we move forward it will become essential that we continue to develop ways of collaborative working that promote the highest standards of animal health and welfare.

Therefore, my current strategy is to encourage production of very high quality produce. This, coupled with high animal welfare standards, will ensure a highly sustainable farming industry that has an internationally recognised reputation for its excellence in food production.

In addition, less financial support from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) may be a challenge for farming. The European Commission has emphasised the importance of maintaining farming and food production across the 27 Member States, which is good news for Welsh farmers. Single Payment will continue to be the main support mechanism for farmers but with pressure on the EU budget and austerity measures in Member States, farmers will increasingly become market dependent.

The future CAP is emphasising the importance of food and environmental security as well as sustainable rural development, and funding will be maintained to support the provision of these 'public goods'. Farmers need to be astute business men and women to secure a profitable future through an integrated approach to the production of food and environmental benefits. CAP Reform inevitably means change and business planning will greatly reduce negative impacts such as income redistribution.

Elin Jones, Thank You.