



Media Release – 8 September 2011 – For Immediate Release

Future of farming discussed in Penrith

With rising energy prices and financial and environmental sustainability on people's minds, a discussion on Agriculture in Cumbria on 7th September provided an excellent opportunity for an informative debate. Penrith Action for Community Transition (PACT) is hosting a series of evening discussions, which started with the topic of Nuclear Energy in July.

A good number of people braved the wet weather and attended the event at St. Andrews Parish rooms where former local dairy farmer Viv Lewis gave an introduction to the subject. She began with some Cumbria specific facts on farming:

- Farming provides 12% of employment in Cumbria
- Average income for a farmer in Cumbria is £21,000
- 40% of income is made up of subsidies which in recent times have moved away from encouraging an increase in production to focusing on environmental stewardship.

In order to get these subsidies, farmers are faced with a new challenge that many traditional farmers struggle with - paperwork. In recent years the administration side of farming has ballooned into what many farmers feel is a bureaucratic nightmare of form filling.

The discussions continued between attendees during a brief pause in proceedings for some light refreshments.

After the break the discussion turned to diversification of farming which has often be heralded as a way of keeping farms going in difficult times. Seasonal foods and an emphasis on 'buying local' have also been a viable option for many farmers. Elsewhere with the incentives currently available for renewable energy, moving from fields of crops to fields of photovoltaic panels is seen by some as an attractive option. Local farmers pointed out that diversification is not something undertaken lightly as it can be a tremendous amount of work and in some cases requires a complete re-skilling of what is becoming an aging workforce.

This raised the observation that in many cases labour shortages, due to a public perception of manual labour being demeaning, have lead to skill

shortages in many parts of the country that have to be filled by immigrant workers from Europe.

In fact, diversification has always been part of life in the farming community where most farms cannot be solely reliant on the farm for income. Traditionally many farmers would have had second jobs and other income streams thereby increasing their resilience to poor harvests and market forces.

There was general acceptance that the food chain is very wasteful with huge losses along the entire length. This combined with the fact that society does not place enough value on food due to supermarket price wars and cheap imports means we may soon need to change our ways as food prices rise. This is due to rising transport and fertiliser costs as we run out of cheap oil that currently drives the system.

In terms of the future of farming, taking into account climate change, peak oil rising food prices and population growth it is certain that the industry faces many challenges but if we are to have food security in the UK the farmers role will be at the forefront of feeding the country.

PACT would like to thank all those that attended, particularly Viv for enlightening us all on the farming industry and the realisation that for many, this was just the beginning in terms of getting to grips with such a large topic.

PACT is hoping to host follow on talks in the near future. For more information go to:
www.penrithact.org.uk

Ends

Notes to Editors:

1. For further information on PACT please contact Peter Ward on Tel: (01768) 840153 or by email at: info@penrithact.org.uk
2. PACT (Penrith Action for Community Transition) is an environmental and community group made up of individuals who share a common purpose: to respond to the twin challenges of peak oil and climate change through strengthening local resilience.
3. The Transition movement was founded in Totnes in 2006 as a community based response to the twin challenges of climate change and peak oil. It is now the fastest growing environmental movement in the world. The term 'Transition' relates to the way in which the movement explores active ways for local communities to make the transition from a life based on oil dependency to one where oil is no longer affordable or even readily available.