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FLETCHERS OF AUCHTERMUCHTY

By Andy Cowan

For those of us who have had the joy of listening to either Nicola or John Fletcher talk about venison or deer, it is sad to hear that they have sold their Scottish based business. The Fletchers have been one of the pioneers of the UK deer farming industry and John even helped Tim Clutton-Brock catch deer on the Island of Rhum in the 1970s.

John has been involved in every aspect of the industry and contributing to its development for 40 or so years. It appears that the inconsistencies and inequalities of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) have got the better of him. In England, deer farms receive government support because of the way CAP reform has been implemented over time. The deer farmers in Scotland and Wales currently receive no single-farm subsidy payment from the EU.

However, Scottish beef and sheep farmers, who do receive the subsidy, can choose to wind down their beef and sheep businesses, diversify into deer farming, and still receive the payment. John Fletcher believes that this subsidized competition is grossly unfair. He has repeatedly asked for support from the Scottish Government in addressing the anomaly. He estimates that by running his business for so long without subsidies he has, since it was launched in 1973, saved the taxpayer more than £1 million. The Fletcher farm is 80 acres, carries about 450 deer and employs up to five people. It would have probably received about £10,000-£15,000 per annum in subsidies.

A Scottish Government spokesperson said that that under existing CAP rules there was no opportunity to bring Scottish deer farmers into the single-farm payment scheme. However, they claim "plans are being made" to change the system. I think the Fletchers have probably made the right decision in this case!!