



Exodus of pig farmers predicted unless producer returns increase

An exodus of pig farmers was forecast by industry leader and Norfolk farmer Rob Mutimer unless supermarkets back home-grown producers.

Retailers must pay more for high-quality, welfare-friendly British pork, Mr Mutimer told more than 40 members of Holt & District Farmers' Club (at the March meeting).

If the supermarkets don't step up to the plate and pay more for pork, then he predicted an exodus of pig producers in the coming months. Mr Mutimer, who is chairman of the National Pig Association and runs about 700 outdoor sows at Swannington, said that current pig price of about 148p kg was not sustainable.

Animal feed accounted for about 70pc of total production costs and in the past few weeks, prices have soared. With wheat now around £300 per tonne, the burden on producers was becoming intolerable, said Mr Mutimer. In addition, other costs were soaring rapidly with the price of "red" diesel also surging.

He said that urgent discussions have started with supermarkets to secure better returns for producers. Mr Mutimer said that Britain has led the field over the past few decades in the production of outdoor and welfare-friendly pork.

And the industry had made great strides in reducing use of antibiotics in pig production. In the past five years, it had cut use of antibiotics by 72pc, he said.

His parents Tom and Janet Mutimer, has been among the first in Norfolk to start a fully outdoor pig herd in 1973 at Woodlands Farm. He had taken over this livestock enterprise and expanded production in a long-term relationship with Waitrose since 1995.

He shocked many in his audience with the brutal story of being dropped as a contracted supplier to Sainsbury's more than 30 years ago. "I received a call from their buyer on a Friday afternoon at 3pm. They didn't want our pigs. That was it," he said.

Fortunately, by the following Tuesday afternoon, Waitrose agreed to take their pigs. It has been a successful partnership and today, 90pc of their production went to Waitrose and the remaining 10pc or so to the family's Swannington Farm to Fork butchery business.

Now run with his wife Helen, it supplies 160 customers and employs almost 20 dedicated staff rearing pigs, processing and delivering across Norfolk. It had started in 2005 and in the past decade, between 2012 and 2019 had grown at a constant 14pc a year.

Producers had been losing heavily for many months and just a few weeks ago, it seemed that there were the first hints of an improvement in the industry's fortunes. However, massive increases in feed wheat and also soya, another key ingredient for most pig rations, were not helping.