

Rural Crime podcast – v3

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Will Evans: Hi, I'm Will Evans, and welcome to another episode of Ahead of the Field from NFU Mutual. Today we're in the beautiful Scottish borders, and you might be able to tell from my voice that I'm not feeling too pretty myself today. While this is a dream setting, our topic is one that keeps many of us awake at night, rural crime. We'll be finding out which types of crime are causing farmers the most concern...

Alan: ... theft of agricultural vehicles and equipment, same for forestry, quad bikes, down to livestock offences. Whether it's theft or attacks and distress on livestock itself, fly tipping, fuel theft...

Will: ...what the police and communities are doing to protect us all...

Tim: ...that's a tractor that was stolen six months ago. We've tracked it through six countries, we've worked with the police force there, we've put it on a loader and we've brought it back, and that's a strong message that we will not just allow this to happen...

Will: ...and what steps we can all take to stop criminals in their tracks...

Jamie: ...take the keys out of your machines and, if you can, take them into the yard and put them in the shed. If a criminal doesn't know the machine's there, they can't steal it. For more details, NFU mutual ...

And for more details, NFU Mutual have just released their annual Rural Crime report. You can download it now by searching for NFU Mutual Rural Crime 2019 Report.

So, welcome to Kirkton Farm in Hawick, 60 miles south of Edinburgh. It's run by Laura Bell and her partner, Scott.

Will: So, tell us what you've got going on here?

Laura: Hi Will. So, we're a mixed unit here. We're the fourth generation of Bells to farm at Kirkton. We've got 150 acres of arable, about 150 cows and also some sheep running about, as well, so lots to keep us busy.

Will: Okay. So, is crime something that keeps you awake at night?

Laura: It is, yes. I would say there's been an increase in the number of thefts and things recently, rural crime. So, yes, it's a growing concern, I would say.

Will: So, have you got any direct experience with the crime here, yourself?

Laura: Unfortunately, yes. A few years ago, we had a couple of incidents within a short period of time. The first, we had some thieves who attempted to steal our bike, and the following weekend we had some thieves who actually managed to get away with our stock lorry. They

got about a mile out the road and it broke down on them, which was quite funny, but they ... as a result, they legged it from the scene and dropped an item of clothing. So, the police managed to take forensics and things and tied it up with a, sort of, known crime circle, I suppose, and they were convicted along with a number of other charges. Which was a good result, I suppose.

And actually, they didn't get the quad bike, either. They took it over the road, up a farm track and left it. I presume they were hoping to come back for it, but they were disturbed while they were trying to get away by our neighbour, who sort of confronted them. So, we were lucky in that instance as well.

Will: Yeah. Quad bikes are a big problem with rural crime, aren't they? They do seem to target them.

Laura: Yeah, they do seem to be a favourable item for thieves. In the same night that we had our lorry stolen, there was a local farm had three quad bikes stolen. And I think their intention would be to take our lorry, to then load the quad bikes into it and disappear in the middle of the night. So, yes, they do seem to be a common thing to be disappearing.

Will: Which is quite scary as well, isn't it?

Laura: It is. It's a horrible thought that someone's been snooping about your farmyards, and especially when your house is very close by. It is, it's horrible. You don't feel very secure at all.

Will: And you're also the local NFU Mutual agent, so is crime something that you talk a lot about in that role, as well?

Laura: Yes, it is and, again, unfortunately it's something we're talking about a bit more due to the recent problems that we've had locally. It does have to be quite a sensitive subject, you know. It can put people in a very worrying position. And at the same time, you don't want to be over-the-top with things and end up, sort of, scaremongering, as such.

Will: Also joining us here is Inspector Alan Dron, the National Rural Crime Coordinator here in Scotland. Hi, Alan.

Alan Dron: How you doing?

Will: Considering how much of Scotland is rural, you must cover a huge area.

Alan: Yeah, we do, actually. Over 95% of Scotland is designated rural, whether accessible or remote. And everything within it, from Shetland all the way down to the Borders, that's what we cover.

Will: What are the most widespread types of crime that you deal with?

Alan: Particularly in terms of the rural, I don't think it's any different to any other part of the UK. The theft of agricultural vehicles and equipment,

same for forestry, quad bikes, down to livestock offences. Whether it's theft or attacks and distress on livestock itself, fly tipping, fuel theft, much like everywhere else, I think, in the UK.

- Will: And is rural crime becoming more sophisticated?
- Alan: Absolutely. Something that we've always tried to make the link with to show there is serious, organised criminality behind it, a lot of the crimes that are now happening you can see are involving more than one person. There's planning involved, they're taking bigger quantities, and they also have an out. They also realise that there's money to be made.
- Will: Now, you've headed up the creation of something called SPARC. Could you explain a bit about that, please, and what does it stand for?
- Alan: No problem at all. SPARC is the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime. It involves 16 key partners, which is everyone from NFU Mutual, NFU Scotland, Scottish Government, the Crown Office and various other land owners, Rural Watch, British Horse Society of Scotland and others, all working together in a cohesive structure to tackle rural crime wherever it's occurring in Scotland. And also, look for solutions, which is key. Building confidence of those in the communities to report things.
- Will: So, that must present its own logistical challenges?
- Alan: Yeah, absolutely. Obviously, we have the remit to cover all of Scotland. So, that is everything from where we are just now in the lovely Borders with the oystercatchers overhead, through the highlands, the mountains, the islands themselves, whether that's the Western Isles or Isla, Mull, going up to Shetland, Orkney. Each is different in its geography and demographics, but each deserves the same amount of attention and service that SPARC and SPARC's members can actually offer.
- Will: Okay. And what difference is it making?
- Alan: Hopefully quite a bit. It'll take time but, like everything, this is why it's trying to get that message out, that's consistent. We're trying to ensure that we are the voice for those within the rural communities and environment. We take any of their issues seriously, which is another key aspect, and gain the confidence of those who live, work and enjoy Scotland's rural communities.
- Laura: Yeah, we've been involved locally in some events with farmers highlighting various different types of rural crime and the types of things they can do to hopefully avoid this happening, or how they should deal with it if they do have it.
- Will: Have farmers responded well to that?
- Laura: Yes, they have. We've had a number of people at the various different events that we've done, and I think they all are realising that they do

need to be more careful with how they protect their items. So, yes, there's been a really good response to it.

Will: Tim Price is with us now, NFU Mutual's Rural Affairs Specialist. Tim, can you tell us about the rural crime report, please?

Tim Price: NFU Mutual insures about three-quarters of farmers across the UK. And because of that, we've got a huge amount of data about the claims that come up on farms. And one of the areas is on theft. So, rather than just pay out claims, we try and use that data to inform police and, in fact, government, as to what's going on with rural crime. Where it's growing, what's being stolen, and share the expertise we've got with farmers to help them secure their farms and reduce the ability of criminals to steal from our countryside.

Will: And what are the key findings from this year's report?

Tim: Well, this year we've seen quite a jump in the cost of rural crime. It's up 12%, and that follows a similar rise last year, after about five years when it was flat. So, we are concerned that there's now momentum behind this rise, so we're very keen to spread the message to police, to government, to farmers, everybody in the countryside, that they need to do more to protect the countryside.

Because it's just not about a battery going or a few tools from a workshop, it's big stuff, now. It's organised. We're seeing tractors worth over £100,000 being stolen. We're seeing dozens and hundreds of quad bikes being stolen. We're seeing sheep, now ... it used to be half a dozen go. Now, it's 50, 60, even up to 100 being taken. So, this all points to it being organised, and linked to other crimes such as hare coursing, such as money laundering ... one that we see particularly at the moment is that thieves steal a big loader from a farm, use it to smash into a building in a town or a village with a cash machine, drag that machine out, often causing huge damage, to get the money out of the cash machine. So, it's affecting the whole of the rural community, not just farmers.

Will: Yeah. And, Alan, 12% is a big rise, especially after a 13% rise the previous year. What do you think is behind that?

Alan: Well, I think, as Tim's highlighted, there is definitely more organised criminality behind it in Scotland, as obviously the report shows. A 62% increase, which was the largest single out of all the regions. However, in a way, whilst any rise is disappointing, I think the scale ... and when you look at the context, that actually shows that the amount of theft actually hadn't increased, but it was the value. It was actually, you know, of greater value. It is more organised. It is definitely gangs, rather than just an individual, and it is widespread. But it is also across the borders. It is across Scotland to England. We know there are criminal groups operating in Wales that are also into Scotland and England, and that's where we've got to raise awareness. For us, through SPARC, raising awareness, gaining the confidence of farmers to report, is key. That is one of our key things. So, we actually expected a rise because, obviously, that then hopefully shows that there's a

better trust and confidence in SPARC to actually then deal with the criminality where it's occurring.

Will: And some crimes, like hare coursing for instance, that might seem fairly minor, but they're very often linked to more serious organised crime, aren't they?

Alan: Absolutely. Why do we have, in Scotland, in certain parts of the east coast, vehicles that are driving six, eight hours from Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, to find a field in Scotland? And it's not just that one field to try and find a hare. They are violent individuals who are carrying out violent acts. There's a health and safety implication, as well. Farmers, don't go and challenge these people. But when they're in this area, as well, they're not just after that hare. They might be looking to steal, you know, whether it's a quad bike or dump fly tipping, anything else. It is all interlinked and, again, that's a key aspect of trying to raise awareness.

Will: So, with these machines that are getting stolen, where are they going to? Where are they ending up?

Alan: A lot of the high-value tractors and the quad bikes are getting taken out of this country. We know that for a fact. We have had some success in locating them in Eastern Europe. So, they are clearly being organised, taken for a reason, and one of our challenges is to try and prevent that reason from happening.

Tim: It's certainly the case that more and more of this machinery is going abroad and, for that reason, NFU Mutual provides funding for a police unit which tracks stolen machinery through the border forces, and will go to extreme lengths to recover it from abroad. We've helped with operations to get machinery back from Mediterranean countries, all over Eastern Europe ... and the reason is to send a message to the organised criminals responsible, that we just won't accept it. And it really does give a buzz to the police officers and our own staff who are involved with this, when they get a machine back and it comes back into the country. And we get a picture and they say, well, it's just a tractor. No, that's a tractor that was stolen six months ago. We've tracked it through six countries, we've worked with the police force there, we've put it on a loader and we've brought it back, and that's a strong message that we will not just allow this to happen.

There's a huge amount of trade of second-hand farm machinery that's sold legitimately from the UK and is exported to the developing world, and if you go to some of the ports ... so, there are hundreds and hundreds of tractors and machinery items that you can't really tell what they are, and there are containers full of other bits of kit. And it's simply impossible for officers to check all of it, and that's why stolen kit does get out of the country.

Will: We're also joined, now, by Jamie Smart. Jamie, you're a farmer, too. What sort of farm have you got?

Jamie Smart: I've got a small arable farm in West Lothian, 250 acres of cereals. So,

growing oilseed rape, barley, wheat and some grass for hay.

Will: Okay. And I know you're involved in the SPARC initiative, as well. Why do you think so much rural crime goes unreported?

Jamie: NFU Scotland have noticed that a lot of our members seem to be, kind of, shy about reporting incidents, sometimes. Sometimes because they think it's not going to do any good. But often, I think, it's because they're embarrassed. Maybe it's been a while since the equipment has been last used and, you know, when they're asked by the police, when did you last see it? And they say oh, two days ago, or two weeks ago or two months ago, and that can bring a bit of embarrassment to farmers.

Will: So, is it important for farmers to start taking more responsibility for preventing crime?

Jamie: We've got to make sure that we try and prevent these crimes. We've got to harden our boundaries against criminals. And I think the main thing is, report incidents to the police, whether it's a theft or even just a suspicious vehicle going around the area. If the police don't know about it, they can't do anything about it.

Will: Just before we carry on with the rest of this episode, a reminder that NFU Mutual's annual report on rural crime is available to download now. Just go online and search NFU Mutual Rural Crime 2019 Report. Or, of course, talk to your local agent. Right, back to the programme.

So, we've talked about the figures, there, but one of the main findings is about the amount of worry and anxiety this issue causes, isn't it, Tim?

Tim: That's right. The figures show the numbers and the costs associated with crime, but we find talking to farmers is that the fear of crime, and the fact that neighbours have had something stolen, or a suspicious vehicle's been reported, causes huge amounts of anxiety to farmers. And really adds to the sense of isolation that's such a problem at the moment in rural communities, because farmers now tend to work alone. They are, sort of, quite a rare species in a lot of rural areas, rather than the heart of the communities they were a generation ago. So, there's a huge amount that can be done to rebuild those networks. Sometimes through social media, involving people who've moved in to report anything suspicious, and just generally to make themselves known, who they are. And, if anybody sees anything dodgy, to give them a shout, if they're not around to call the officers in the scheme. And all that can really help to provide information that can bring criminals to justice.

Will: And Laura, what effect does the worry from crime have on your everyday life?

Laura: I think it's just the change, you know. Once upon a time in rural life, you could leave your doors open. You know, you knew who was going around and you felt very, very safe in the countryside. I think that's the

biggest thing, that you just don't feel as safe as you maybe once did. You know, you have to go around locking everything and, ultimately, you want to protect everything that you work so hard to achieve and to have. So, it is, it's a real concern, and it's a very sensitive subject for a number of people. As Tim mentioned with isolation, we are finding that there are a lot of people that can be just lone people on their farm, and it must be very frightening for them. Which, again, is why we organise some of these local events where we can have people along, give them demonstrations on extra security measures they can put in place on the farm, to hopefully make them feel a bit safer on their own farms.

Will: And in your role as an NFU Mutual agent, you'll speak to lots of farmers. Do you get the sense that people are worried about it in the local community, as well?

Laura: Yes, definitely, and I think we can see that from the numbers that attend our local events. And just, you know, whether it be at NFU Scotland branch meetings, it's always a hot topic for discussion. So, yes, it's definitely an issue for the whole community.

Tim: One issue that came up recently is farmers telling me that they can no longer go out as a family to things like a county show, because they just aren't leave the farm unoccupied. So, that's really changing the nature of farming life, that you can't go with family to see the county show and the stock and meet your neighbours, anymore.

Will: Alan, what can we all do as farmers to help prevent crime on our farms?

Alan: All farmers can do the simple things. It's a collective approach. So, start with not putting keys in quad bikes or tractors, making it easy pickings. And also, being mindful of the access laws, shut gates, make sure that you have up CCTV, look at any preventative measures and schemes that are out and about, have signage but, also, look out for each other. Be the eyes and ears of your neighbour. Use Rural Watch, which we have in Scotland, which is a very effective alert system. It's catching criminals. And there are a lot of people, particularly in the most vulnerable areas, who need that little bit of assistance. There are so many back roads, it's a big, big environment. So, if somebody sees a van, is it feeling right? Does it look right? Do something about it. Don't let that van disappear without contacting someone. Simple steps make a big difference.

Will: Tim, I know you've identified three strands to securing your farm. Can you explain those to us, please?

Tim: Yeah, it will follow on very much from what Alan was saying. We suggest at NFU Mutual that you have a look at your farm from the point where an opportunist thief or an organised gang would see it, and just look. Are there lots of machines in front of it that maybe don't look secured? Are there two ways they can get in and out? Thieves really love to go on a farm where they can get in one way and out the other, if they're spotted. And from that, there are then three ways to look at security.

First of all, physical. Padlocks, big bars, gates on the yard ... but of course, in Scotland that's slightly more difficult, because the rights to access laws mean that you can't really padlock gates in that way. Secondly, there are the high-tech solutions, which are playing a much bigger role, today. Things like beams that will ping on your phone if somebody comes through in the night. CCTV, as well. Very reassuring to be able to just snap it on to see what's going on in the yard or a building. And thirdly, community. It's probably the best one of all that, if you can rebuild the links with your neighbours and neighbouring farmers to just keep an eye out and, if they see anything, know that it's best to report it then and there. Because many times, particularly after a livestock theft, we get people come along and say, oh, we heard a tremendous noise last night, wondered what was going on but we didn't know who to call. So, if we can get those systems in place, then there's a much better chance of catching criminals in the act and bringing them to justice.

Will: John Minary joins us, here. John, you've developed a technology called TecTRACER. Can you tell us about that, please?

John Minary: Yes. It's firmly rooted in forensic technology. It will indelibly mark a sheep or livestock with literally thousands of coded microdots, which will trace said animal back to farm once it's left its home environment, and we've not had that ability before. It's quite an innovative step to take.

Will: Definitely. So, what sort of difference are you seeing that technology make?

John: Well, in essence, it's a deterrent. It really does carry with it a very, very strong deterrent message against theft of the animals in the first place. And where we're seeing it in use correctly with the perimeter signage, then we're seeing levels of repeat victimisation and livestock theft reduced to practically zero.

Will: And is it obvious, then, that the technology is being used on the livestock?

John: We want it to be obvious, which is the perimeter signage which warns, right on the perimeter gate of the farm, that TecTRACER is in use in this farm environment. And it's not visible on the animal itself, but an animal behind that cordon, if you like, or perimeter signage, will be TecTRACER marked. And it's turning the risk paradigm for the criminal. It's raising the risk of arrest, risk of detection onto the criminal. It's turning the risk factors in the farmer's favour.

Will: So, can I bring you all back in here, now? Can I have some of your top tips for preventing rural crime, please? Alan, perhaps you could go first?

Alan: Realising that, in the rural communities, you are vulnerable, so share your eyes and ears and do the simple things.

Will: What about you, Jamie?

Jamie: Take the keys out of your machines and, if you can, take them into the yard and put them in the shed. If a criminal doesn't know the machine's there, they can't steal it.

Tim: Make your farm look like you've really thought about security, so that any would-be thieves think, 'We're not going in there, we'll go somewhere else.'

Laura: I would say get involved with any local initiatives that are on the go, and obviously phone Rural Watch.

Will: Thanks everyone. So I know from speaking to friends and neighbours that sometimes it's not just the fact that the machinery's gone, it's the stress that it causes, as well. I've had people who've had sandstone troughs stolen out of their yard, and stone [mushrooms] and things like that that have been in the family for a very long time, and it's really, really upsetting. It's not just the monetary value. So, this really is a widespread thing across the UK.

There are definite avenues that we can take to prevent rural crime. It's communication, it's speaking to our neighbours. It's, if you see something that you're not sure about, that you think looks a bit dodgy, it's ringing the local police and letting them know. They can't do anything about it if they don't know about it. Things like SPARC, fantastic initiative. Really bringing the rural community and the police back together as a first point of contact from a farm, so you know exactly who to ring.

If you'd like to find out more about rural crime and how to help prevent it, you can download NFU Mutual's annual reports. Just go online and search for NFU Mutual Annual Crime 2019 Report. In the meantime, if you've enjoyed this podcast, please do subscribe, rate and review in the normal way. For now, from me, Will Evans, NFU Mutual and everyone here at Kirkton Farm in the Scottish Borders, it's goodbye.