

RURAL CRIME 2020 PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Hi, I'm Will Evans. Welcome to another episode of Ahead of the field from NFU Mutual. Today, we're talking about something that will have affected a lot of us, rural crime, with Rebecca Davidson from NFU Mutual and Chris Piggott from NaVCIS.

Will: Hello to you both, and thank you for joining us today.

Rebecca: Hello Will.

Chris: Good morning Will.

Will: Rebecca, let's go to you first. The report looking back at rural crime in 2019 has just been released, perhaps you could just talk us through it. What are the key trends?

Rebecca: Well, I think the key trend from the last year is obviously the impact of organized crime on the countryside. Because what we found is there's been quite a marked rise in the value of rural theft in 2019. So it's actually reached 54 million pounds, and that's a 9% rise. And what we found is one of the main drivers behind that is organized gangs targeting very high value equipment and machinery. And that's obviously having a huge impact on farmers, on their businesses, and impacting on the way they work and also the way that they live in their homes.

Will: And what about from a regional perspective? Is there anything surprising in that?

Rebecca: From a regional perspective, it's been quite interesting. What we found was that rural crime rose in every region and nation within the UK. So the biggest increase was seen in Scotland, but their normal cost is actually way below the UK average. And the second highest rise was in Northern Ireland, but that was followed by the East of England. And obviously in the East of England, it's a very big arable area and there's a lot of bigger, more expensive kit that the thieves are going for. The lowest regional increase though, which was very promising, was in the Northeast of England, that was about static, so it was 0.4%, so there was a promising sign there. But for the first year for a long time we've actually seen a rise overall in each nation or region of the UK.

Will: That's quite frightening, isn't it? What changes have you seen over the last five or 10 years?

Rebecca: I think one of the surprising trends, and it's a much older form of rural crime, is rustling. So livestock theft has really been creeping up. So I'd say 10 years ago we probably wouldn't see more than a dozen sheep or lambs being taken in one go, and now we are getting 100 at a time being stolen. So that's something that's been a great concern to us, a great concern to livestock farmers. And

obviously we've had these cases of animals being butchered in fields as well.

Will: Yeah, incredibly upsetting that, isn't it? And especially from, I'm a livestock farmer, from my perspective, it's not just the financial cost, it's the emotional toll that takes on farmers as well, isn't it?

Rebecca: Absolutely, we work to the highest welfare standards in the world and you put so much care and attention and hard work into that. And particularly, for a smaller farmer, and with pedigree animals as well, that can take years to overcome can't it? It can take up to 20, 30 years, when you're looking at breeding lines and things like that. And as you say, it's that emotional cost. And a lot of people have got their children with them as well on the farm, more at the moment with lockdown, so they might be going out to do checks in the evening, and there's nothing more devastating than finding the aftermath of something like that.

Will: Absolutely. Chris, let's turn to you now. Tell us about, NaVCIS, starting with perhaps what it stands for?

Chris: Okay. I'll try and do this very briefly. So we are the National Vehicle Crime Intelligence Service. We're a privately funded policing unit, but we are made up of seconded police officers and police civilian investigators, a number of different factions. The bulk of the unit look at vehicle finance fraud, and that is funded by the motoring industry. We've got a number of offshoots, that have other private funding schemes. We have a freight desk that look at theft, of and from, curtain side and refrigerated lorries and HGBs on the road. We have a leisure officer who looks at caravans and motor homes. We have three officers that are working within UK ports, and they look at container traffic and railroad traffic out of the UK. And you've got myself, and I have the role nationally to collate intelligence and build a picture around private agricultural vehicle theft.

Will: Okay, so in terms of crime associated with agricultural vehicles, what do you think the key takeouts are from 2019 on the report?

Chris: Okay, well obviously we're seeing it creep right up, we're back to the levels where we were five or six years ago, unfortunately. Back at that time, obviously you had these issues with the one key fits all scenario, the inability for police officers on the road to be able to identify something that wasn't road registered. And we went to the manufacturers, we put a lot of pressure on them and a lot of schemes were introduced in terms of fleet management and tracking devices, CESAR marking, immobilizers, chipped keys. And that gave us a steady increase, decrease, sorry, in the theft.

So we've upped the security, but we're still, with some of the stuff, and as see in there, quad thefts, ATV thefts, they're still going through the roof. And we've got technology on those, unfortunately, that's 30 years old, it's very easy to go out and hot wire something like that, as you were seeing with cars 20 years ago when people were joy riding. So of course the thieves know, very easy to move, very easy

to wire, and easy to get away with in the back of a van. And some of these quads now, these ATVs are worth the price of a small family hatchback, and they're in demand all over the world. You've got a central driving position, you haven't got to convert them like you would a car if you want to take it elsewhere. And we're seeing a hell of a lot of this stuff turning up out in Eastern Europe.

Will: Yeah, this part of the world where I live, a lot of livestock farms, almost everyone has a quad bike and there's been a huge amount of them stolen. And sometimes thieves are literally knocking down walls to get at them. It seems like there's only so much you can do, doesn't it?

Chris: Well, people are very determined and the problem is this, and whilst not wanting to put the frighteners on people, if you've had a quad bike stolen once, there are a number of reasons why you're likely to get targeted again. Number one, the thieves know the layout of your farm or your property, they know how to get to it and where you're keeping it. Number two, you're likely to have a new shiny one sitting there in two months because you've been paid out by the insurance company, and they're happy to come along and re-target. And thieves are creatures of habit, they know that you might up your security temporarily, but it's easy to get back in there and have another go. And this is the problem.

So, we've all got to take the approach that we need to up security, the manufacturers need to do that. We're doing a lot of work with them at the moment in conjunction with NFU Mutual and the national rural lead for the plant and agricultural theft, who's a superintendent in Northumbria, we've had a lot of meetings, we're trying to tie them down to upping the security on their products. But by the same token, a lot of the farmers still leave the keys in them. And whilst these people are quite determined, are smashing through walls, some people just aren't helping themselves.

And I'd appeal to people, let's look at the security on it. You don't want to be losing that at a key time, you don't want to be losing that piece of equipment. And it's not just the quads, so for instance, we've seen a big increase in the navigation systems being taken from tractors. And I'm aware of a tractor or a combining in Suffolk two weeks ago that was targeted, where they broke in and they ripped out the screen and they took the dome off the roof. And that put his combine out of use for a week in a key time of the year, when that could actually have a massive impact on the business. And I've seen farmers leaving the business because they've been continually targeted by these thieves and it's just not profitable for them anymore.

Will: No. What are some simple precautions that all farmers should be taking against vehicle theft, apart from taking keys out of the vehicle obviously?

Chris: Yeah, of course, that's number one for me, even if those keys may fit in other machines, don't give them the opportunity. Don't hang them

up on a hook in the barn and think that they're going to be safe there because the quad's the other side of the barn or in another one. But there are layers, I take the onion approach, you want layers of security. So for instance, it depends on your budget, but the quads, there's a quad vice that comes out, that people can lock a quad into, that it's basically impenetrable or would take a long time to get into. There are ground stakes that you can chain a quad to. Tracking devices, the majority of the stuff we recover is off the back of a tracking device. And the smaller equipment, whilst you may feel it's an unnecessary expense, some of the insurers do give quite good discounts for having tracker devices on there. Vehicles, the tractors, you can get ram locks, you can get pedal locking systems, immobilizers.

Marking schemes that help us identify, because the first thing that a thief does when he steals something is rip off the number plate. And they're very good at what they do now, they know if they need to export them, that if they get stopped at the port, they don't want them identified. So we've seen some comprehensive re-engraving of VIN numbers, fake VIN plates, re-spraying of machines to de-identify them, to get them out of the country without being challenged at the port. So all those things help, the more you can do, the less chance there is that you're going to become a victim of a theft.

Will: So we're recording this podcast in the middle of July 2020, obviously the world's a very different place now than it was in 2019. Are you both getting a sense for how COVID and lockdown has changed the rural crime picture? Rebecca, let's go to you first.

Rebecca: I think for the early part of lockdown there was a certain amount of respite, and I think theft overall there was a bit of a decrease. But what worried us when we started to look at some of the trends, that there were particular types of crime that were still taking place, or people were still taking opportunities. So it may have been, for instance, that the regular car thieves, their usual income streams might have dried up, so they were targeting some of the smaller, more portable items like quads and smaller machinery. And very surprisingly, on livestock theft, we actually found that there was a significant spike in that, so again, we were seeing these much bigger numbers of sheep being stolen. And we're concerned about that, because we've spoken about the impact on farmers, but also for the public. There are fears about human health as well because these animals may be slaughtered in unhygienic conditions and they could be going into the food chain illegally as well. So that's been a particular worry for us.

And as Chris said, as things have started to ease, we're sending out a warning to everybody really, to just be on guard because we're talking about criminals who have absolutely no respect for the restrictions and they're still out there.

Will: And Chris, what are some of the changes you've seen?

Chris: Well, as a unit we saw, initially when lockdown came into place, a 30% decrease in car theft. Unfortunately, as Rebecca said, that then meant that people were going out to the countryside, we had some real bad pockets of theft, where we were getting, for instance, Thames Valley area had one property targeted where they had eight large new Holland tractors stolen overnight. It's a phenomenal amount of money to lose. Most of those have been recovered now, but as I say, we've seen pockets of it. And what was happening was, because the police were out in the towns and enforcing in the towns and there wasn't a nighttime economy, we were getting better results with the offenders being targeted. So they were able to get out into the rural areas, they're able to stop the lorries on the road.

So we have had some good, significant arrests. And as a result of that, some of these theft problems have curtailed and tailed off. But the problem is still out there, people are still targeting the quad bikes because it's an easy way to get from A to B without being seen on the road, going across a field. So, unfortunately, whilst the car side of things there was a reduction, we're still seeing a lot of stuff being stolen and still detecting a lot of stuff going out of the country destined for Eastern Europe.

Will: I just wanted to ask you about a perceived minor crimes, like fly-tipping or hare coursing, those kind of things can cause huge levels of emotional stress for farmers and landowners, as well as great expense often, certainly in the case of fly-tipping. What advice do you have for farmers listening, who might be regularly dealing with those kind of crimes, Chris?

Chris: Well, report them in, number one, any suspicious vehicles or anything like that, but they need to be taking those details and passing them on to the police. The bigger picture is this, organized crime gangs won't stick to one type of criminality. The people that are out hare coursing will be looking at what vehicles are there, looking at opportunities, passing that back to their colleagues, taking videos, taking photographs and looking at vulnerabilities at a property. And it's the same with the organized crime gangs that are doing this large scale industrial fly-tipping, they don't just stick to one type of crime. They have a broader type of criminality, they look at all types, they'll look at stealing vehicles and it's funding further criminality.

Advice wise, what can you do? You can put up CCTV. Some forces, Gloucestershire were quite successful when they did an experiment with doing bunding around the farms, so there was only one access point on and off of the farm. That seemed to be fairly good when they were getting issues there. But it's difficult, it's very difficult because there aren't the policing resources in the rural communities, despite the fact that there are more available now, even though the night time economy is coming back, they're not going to be there.

But it's report, report, report, don't think because you haven't heard anything back on it that it's not being picked up. Because they will see a pattern and they will look at the pattern of criminality in that

area, and that will drive the police to put resources into that area. So the more it's reported, the more an analyst could look at it and say, "This is a problem area, we need to be concentrating on this." And this is how we'll get the police officers back into the countryside and how the forces will actually look, as they have recently in Northumbria and Surrey, in introducing quite significant rural crime teams. So that the rural community knows that we are interested in that type of crime and we are taking it seriously.

Will: That's good to hear. Rebecca, what would you say that farmers and those in a rural community can do to protect themselves and others?

Rebecca: I think it takes a number of different layers of security, as Chris has said, just as no one measure alone will work. The more that you've got. So from a physical security point of view, you could really fortify the farm, obviously having really good locks and gates. And as Chris has said, we've even talked about earthworks as well to fortify the farm. There's also, technology plays a part, so whether it be CCTV or some measure that will send alerts to your phone. So there's a lot of good tech out there.

But also your community as well. Because what we do find is when you've got a really active rural or farm watch group that works in close partnership with the police and with local residents, sharing that information can really make a difference. It can piece together some important patterns for the police and also it can bring criminals to justice as well. So it's about everybody working together. And I think with some of the rural crime teams, it's fantastic when you've got a dedicated resource, but they're often covering a really huge stretch of area. So the more contacts that they've got within that area sharing information, the bigger the impact they can make.

Chris: Social media is a fantastic form of getting information out. And there are a number of schemes out there, a lot of areas run their own local farm watch schemes. A lot of the police officers now have WhatsApp groups where they will go on to that group and information can be fed back to the rural crime teams. And then you've got organizations such as Farm Watcher UK that host I think over six million people on Facebook and Twitter, that they have access to. And feeding information into them will come back to the police. So that smallest snippet of information can be the one thing that leads us to a successful prosecution.

Will: So I guess the important takeaway from that is just to get on the phone, isn't it? If you see anything suspicious, get on the phone to your neighbors, to the police, to the local farm watch group and let them know what's going on.

Chris: Yeah, share it wherever you can. The more you can share it, the more chance we've got of catching them.

Will: Okay.

Rebecca: The challenge that we have though of course is unless there's a joined up approach and everything's working, then unfortunately the criminality does get displaced to another area. So it can't be good enough that we've got one really great security measure or scheme in one area, which just puts the criminals off, but they don't just give up all together, they'll move to the next patch. So the more people that can do it, the more difficult it will be for the criminals, and then maybe they'll turn their focus to something else.

Will: What about stress and anxiety? We talk a lot about rural isolation at the moment, and COVID has increased that really for a lot of farmers and people who live in the countryside. Rural crime, whether it's minor crimes, as we mentioned, like fly-tipping or whether it's major crimes like vehicle theft, or even violent assault and things like that, it's very worrying, isn't it? It's making people feel very vulnerable, I suppose. What do you say to that, Rebecca?

Rebecca: Well, we survey our agents every year about the effects of rural crime. And we found that one in four agents last year said to us that they knew somebody who'd been forced to change the way that they live, work, and farm as a result of rural crime. And we're constantly finding that people are having to change farming practice as a result of this. And it does wear you down. And I think particularly this year, there's fears that the impact will be felt even harder because farmers have been working flat out to feed the nation, we've had problems with weather, and then obviously the additional challenges and pressures of COVID as well. So that will take its toll on people as well. So it's really important that people feel supported.

And I think also one of the biggest fears that came out from our survey last year was this fear of repeat attacks as well, that people often feel staked out and they might lock up a quad in a particular area and that's the only part that the thieves will go to, so they've obviously been watching them. And that's your place where you live with your family, it's not just a place of work, it's a home.

Will: Yeah, exactly, especially often you've got young children on the farm, as you mentioned earlier, it is a horrible feeling knowing you're being watched like that, isn't it?

Rebecca: Absolutely. But I think, as I said, there are some beacons of hope and I think that while we're very alarmed by this figure, we do feel that it would be far worse if it wasn't for a lot of the fantastic schemes that are going on, we just need to build that up and have more of them. And this year we invested about 430,000 pounds to tackle rural crime. So that includes funding towards NaVCIS to coordinate their intelligence. Also, we've provided funding for things like the welfare and shelter of stolen livestock, a number of different rural security schemes. And also we've introduced a new security advice service for our Directors & Officers policy holders with AIG PrivateEdge, so that's a new service that we've launched this year.

Will: Well, thank you both very much for giving up your time to join us today, it's been really, really interesting, I'm off to read the report

and go through it all. But thank you for your expertise and for your time and keep up the good work.

That's it from this edition of Ahead of the field. From me, Will Evans and everyone at NFU Mutual we wish our listeners and the farming community a safe and secure end of summer and rest of the year.