

# Farmers join protest despite payments vow

By Pat Scott

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FARMERS from the Huntly area yesterday joined a rally at the Scottish Parliament to highlight the deepening cash crisis in Scotland's countryside.

The National Farmers' Union Scotland (NFUS) rally went ahead despite the intervention on Tuesday of First Minister Nicola Sturgeon to end the payment delay which has impacted heavily on the whole rural economy.

The Scottish Government had been under fire over its failure to deliver support payments to farmers and crofters.

Payments have in the past been made in December but, to date, just over £100 million of support under basic Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) schemes has been paid out from the total budget of almost £400 million.

The delay is blamed on a flawed £178 million IT delivery system but one local farmer who made the trip to Edinburgh yesterday said that politicians had to accept their share of responsibility.

John Gordon, from Wellheads, a past president of the Huntly branch of NFUS, said that he had decided to join the rally because of his total disillusionment in Rural Affairs Secretary Richard Lochhead and the SNP government's ineptitude.

Mr Gordon said: "The politicians, the civil servants and the not-fit-for-purpose IT system are all inextricably linked in this fiasco which is



Livestock farmer, John Gordon took part in the NFUS rally at Holyrood yesterday.

Picture: Lyn MacDonald. Image No. 032820

having a real effect on the wider rural economy."

Last Friday, more than 100 farmers and agri trade representatives gathered in Thainstone to highlight to some of the region's political representatives the impact the failure to deliver new CAP support was having.

Farmers say that the £300 million yet to be paid out is creating a black hole in the rural economy.

Mr Gordon added: "Banks are supporting farm businesses in the expectation that there will be a CAP payment coming but they have no such expectation for supply companies which are having to extend credit to farmers while they wait for payments, which is having an effect on businesses."

The subsidy payment helps close the gap between the cost of production for farmers and what they receive. Without the payment food prices would need to be substantially higher, according to Mr Gordon.

He said: "Prices for every farm commodity are at rock bottom. The need for the payments to be made on time was never greater. Farmers at least deserved some honesty from Scottish Government on when the payments would be made. Dates have been set and missed but the politicians knew these dates could not be met."

On Tuesday it was announced that farmers and crofters still waiting for a direct subsidy payment at the end of March would receive a cash advance

from the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government will use up to £200 million of national funds to provide cash support while CAP claims are processed.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said: "The transition to a new, more complex CAP that is affecting payment schedules right across Europe is happening as farmers and crofters are dealing with poor market prices and challenging weather conditions.

"We are less than halfway through the payment window allowed by Europe, and the majority of Scottish producers - more than 10,000 - have already received a subsidy payment. However, payments are not being made as quickly as we would like.

"I very much recognise the cash flow issues facing Scottish agriculture. That is why the Scottish Government has earmarked up to £200 million of national funds so that any farmer or crofter who has not received an instalment by the end of March receives a nationally-funded payment from the Scottish Government in April."

Mr Lochhead confirmed that Scottish Beef Scheme payments would be made in the middle of April, in line with previous years.

Allan Bowie, NFUS president, said: "We welcome the First Minister's involvement and intervention and finally we have clear timelines drawn."

The rally reinforced the call for an independent inquiry to be carried out into the problems encountered in delivering agricultural support payments this year, to ascertain why the system failed.