



Chris Jackson

Adopting the ‘can do’ attitude

We started the New Year with great optimism that our world would revert back to something which most of us would recognise as ‘normal,’ that is to say being able to travel and mix freely with friends and colleagues, alas that was not to be – late last year we were being led to believe that the Covid-19 virus would soon be confined to the history books.

Our scientists have now discovered a slightly different and apparently much more virulent strain.

However, we need to remain optimistic, as we go forward in to 2021 and adopt the mantle of ‘we can do’ and dismiss the negativity that our media force upon us.

In an unprecedented short time the world’s scientist have developed effective vaccines. All that remains to be done is to get that vaccine to the population, which will rely on our adopting that ‘can do’ attitude.

For those of us involved in the livestock industry such a disaster should not have been completely unexpected, particularly when so many people not only live in close proximity to each other, but easily and readily travel the world - an ideal ‘breeding ground’ and vector for a virus to thrive and spread.

For us involved in primary agricultural production it is easier to stay better isolated as our work is by its very nature mostly conducted away from the big population hubs. We are therefore privileged from this perspective and it is quite difficult to assess the disease’s ultimate impact on our lives.

Some effects

Let’s take a look at some of the effects that this terrible disease has had on our industry.

For us in the Western world, where primary food production is not very well understood by consumers whose demands we have to meet. The immediate effect that millers had to react to was an increased demand for flour in supermarkets for home baking, with a drop in demand for flour and flour based products going to the catering industry in all of its formats.

Millers saw demand increasing significantly for small bags of flour from these outlets worldwide, especially for 1kg bags, as people were ordered by governments to stay at home and only go out for necessary shopping. Therefore consumers were buying durable wheat-based products to do more baking at home. In combination with this the demand on millers to supply restaurants and other catering establishments dropped significantly.

Perhaps much more significantly - with people having to stay isolated and only travelling where it was not possible to work from home - there has been a drop in grains used for ethanol production, meaning less distillers dried grains with solubles, and therefore less of a protein rich by-product used as an alternative to soybeans and maize in animal feed production.

In a bizarre twist the inability to travel by car, or more significantly

by air, has resulted in the use of less ethanol, and significantly less crude oil. This has made a major and very positive difference to global warming along with causing much less environmental damage - and is very good news for planet earth.

As we have discovered new ways of working involving no travel, this has encouraged us to work with the technologies that we have seen develop in recent years and has readily been adopted to host the huge demand for virtual meetings, allowing many businesses to adapt and continue.

For our very conservative industry the value of face-to-face meetings must never be dismissed as unnecessary, indeed in the greater world we must not lose sight of the fact that humans are social animals and we need physical contact.

We also have to recognise that by working together and pooling ideas the end result is usually more than the sum of the individual parts, which is vital in keeping innovation and advancement moving forward. Vaccines and ‘herd immunity’ will be our saviour in this respect.

Initially as the pandemic spread across the world, problems of supply of raw materials were seen as countries began to lockdown borders in an attempt to limit the spread of the virus. In many cases this has been seen as too little too late.

Another very positive effect of this disease’s spread has led to some governments stepping up their disease surveillance strategies to identify new threats before they are out of control. South African scientists in particular identified a new more virulent strain very early. By being up front and honest with the world their example is exemplary.

Stresses and strain on staff

My understanding for labour is that the pandemic has affected companies in many ways, with social distancing measures being implemented in some places have meant that some have to reduce employee numbers per shift.

By far the biggest problem is when staff or people close to them test positive, causing them to have to self isolate. These absences mean that some parts of production have to be closed down disrupting supply, with newer and much better instant testing this problem is being reduced considerably.

Once again our brilliant scientists are finding brilliant solutions that use technology and allow us to keep our industries operating.

With all of the lessons learnt, at huge cost both financial and in human terms, we must not forget that the world has seen major pandemics before. They have been eliminated. We must also be aware that new technologies allow us to know far more about what is happening worldwide, giving us the means to address problems. We need to keep a positive perspective as there has never before been so many people living to the age that is now expected and kept there by modern science.

Therefore, together we should look forward positively. We have come to realise the benefits forced upon us by compulsory limitations of travel, of family connections and friendships. The unselfish help that strangers have given endlessly to others in need. Now that we are getting close to seeing large parts of the world vaccinated we should look forward to developing our lives and business in a new way to the benefit of all.

I would like to add some good news for primary producers following the UK’s departure from the EU. I can report that gene editing, which has been under development both here but also in Japan, Australia and the Argentine, will be further developed. This ‘process of development’ will allow crops to be produced with less reliance on chemicals and livestock production less reliant on antibiotics. Excellent news for both our producers and consumers.

We have a lot to look forward to in 2021, when we collectively adopt the ‘can do’ attitude.