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'Billion starve while the planet warms'

Of the 250 international delegates who attended the first International Dairy Federation Summit on Climate Change, the farmers could be forgiven for feeling the weight of the world on their shoulders.

More than 40 countries were represented in Edinburgh, Scotland, on June 25-27 as farmers and industry leaders gathered to see if there was consensus on climate change, and to develop a better understanding of the issues facing the industry.

The summit was titled Climate Change – The Heat Is On? The answer was a definitive “yes”.

During the summit, delegates were served a potent cocktail of being responsible for feeding the world while helping the planet avoid the dangers of climate change.

In the end, the issue was defined by three key pieces of information:

Fact: One billion people live in food poverty today.

Estimation: 10-12 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions is produced by livestock

Prediction: the planet's temperature will increase 3°C by 2100.

Over recent years, the honourable profession of farming to provide food for others has been tarnished in the public view by evidence farming is contributing to climate change and local environmental issues such as water quality.

As a result, the complexity of the task facing farmers has grown to meet rising food demand, and rising public demand for reducing environmental impacts.

DairyNZ Director and Waikato dairy farmer Ted Coats said the summit was crucial to galvanise the industry collectively.

“I think we have been too slow to realise the implications of climate change, and therefore slow to invest in it. This is now changing. Equally, we are really now only facing up to the fact this is a global issue, and no one

should act alone or independently. To deal with this issue, we need to act together.

“I have been encouraged by the summit, the contributions, and the evident desire to get this right. There's too much at stake for all of us. New Zealand is by no means alone in the issues we face.”

For the climate change sceptics in the audience, testimonials from countries that would be considered marginal for dairying by New Zealand standards, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, proved the most compelling evidence.

Over the course of 20 years, the lack of rain has become noticeable and dire in some situations. Due to the need for water in Saudi Arabia's cities, it has now decided it cannot grow wheat, and the future for dairying now looks bleak also.

Egyptian farmer Walid El-Sherbiny said the two issues facing his country were whether rising seas would cause the Mediterranean to mix its salt water with the Nile, and changing the cultural habits of the million dairy farmers milking one or two cows.

“For Egypt, the Nile is life. We greatly fear the potential of the Mediterranean Sea mixing with the Nile. We are also running out of land. We cannot afford any longer to have such an inefficient system for dairying if we are to feed our country. The current method is a waste of land, and while our population grows, our available land does not. But how to change the cultural habits of our people?”

Technical director of the UK Climate Impacts Programme, Roger Street, contributed with a presentation of well-rehearsed information, concluding that the next 50 years of climate change cannot be reversed.

“That's locked in by what we have done up till now. What happens

next though – what we do today – will determine the severity of continued cli-

mate change to 2100. I believe we are looking at something in the range of 3°C if reasonable measures are put in place now.”

Dutch farmer Kees Gorter runs a highly intensive system where cows are housed all year round.

In the face of the pressing responsibilities and serious nature of the issue, he voiced comments that were quickly echoed by other farmers in attendance “They say about the Dutch: wooden hat wooden shoes, wooder listen. For me this is true in that I will focus first on the health and well-being of my cows. This is the first thing for me, and from what I hear today, this is also true of farmers around the world. I believe we can feed the world and will find ways to deal with climate change, and it starts with the cow.”

Philip Renner works for Verdict, a Hamilton-based communication agency. He was sent to the summit by [DeLaval](#) New Zealand, the country's leading supplier of dairy systems.





WARNING: Greenpeace makes its point at a global conference on climate change.

PICTURE: Reuters