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Farmers at forefront of risk

An international push to implement policy to reduce agricultural greenhouse gas emissions could unintentionally threaten the world's food security, an agriculture and environment adviser has warned.

Professor Maggie Gill, chief scientific adviser for rural affairs and the environment to the Scottish Government, spoke at the first International Dairy Federation Climate Change Summit in Edinburgh in late June.

She said governments seeking to meet their Kyoto obligations needed to base their decisions on science and an awareness of global priorities. The summit was co-organised by the International Dairy Federation (IDF) and DeLaval.

"We often talk of the three-legged stool of sustainability: economic, environmental and social," she said.

"With a billion in food poverty, which has the greater emphasis? Food security relies on utilising the ability of livestock to turn land unsuitable for arable farming into land producing high-value food. Only a ruminant can do this, by producing milk from grass or plants with no nutritional value to humans.

"Of the world's agricultural land, less than half is suitable for arable farming. We need dairy farmers."

The issue of food miles showed the vulnerability of New Zealand farmers to the reaction from overseas markets.

Management

"It's an issue of risk management and, as farmers are the most exposed to these issues, they should lead the process to manage the risk," she said.

"In that respect, cutting down trees to make more farms does not seem wise."

DairyNZ director Ted Coats said climate change was predominantly a Northern Hemisphere issue.

"I sincerely hope to see those who created the issue taking real



steps to address it, and not exporting it to other countries," he said.

He believed a variety of mitigation measures would be adopted by New Zealand farmers to reduce the impact of an emissions trading scheme (ETS), such as nutrient management and diet manipulation, while planting trees as carbon sinks.

Because of the growth of the dairy industry over recent years, he seriously doubted New Zealand could turn back the clock on our emissions to 1990 levels.

"A mix of consistently high land management amongst all farmers, and new science, holds the future for us."

Dr John Gilliland, chair of the United Kingdom (UK) Rural Climate Change Forum, said there was some consternation in Britain that New Zealand is taking the lead in the debate, as it had wanted to do so.

"And we're not the only ones watching closely."

• Philip Renner, from Verdict, a Hamilton-based communication agency, was sent to the summit by DeLaval New Zealand. **D**