

Tim Fulton

**2007-08 NZ-UK Link Foundation Rural Journalist Travel Fellow ('the Link Rural Travel Fellowship')
NZ Guild of Agricultural Journalist and Communicators
Fellowship report – June, July 2008**

Tim writes: I set off on my trip to the UK hoping to see the impact of food miles and carbon footprint concerns on UK food retailing. I was able to do that but I also came home with an insight into the perennial issue of food price and food security.

The two-week trip coincided with gloomy forecasts for the British economy, characterized by a slump in house prices and a rapid rise in the cost of food and fuel. It was widely agreed that a long period of prosperity was coming to an end, if it wasn't already over.

My interviews with economists and academics at Oxford Analytica, a business briefing service in Oxford, followed by discussions with journalists in the British farming media gave me a sense that the cost of food was again coming to the fore in the mind of British shoppers.

In one sense, this only entrenched a long-standing trend in world food retailing, but the shift in the UK was significant because in recent years there has been growing awareness of the need for sustainable food production; depicted in a sort of shorthand as food miles and the carbon footprint.

The supermarket chains that I visited continued to use food labels to display their commitment to sustainable food production but even more visible was a push to Buy British, particularly in meat products.

In some cases, buying British was equated with sustainable food production. This was significant from a New Zealand perspective, because evidence is emerging that country of origin, and physical distance to market is only one of several factors that determine the impact of food production on the environment.

Yet 'food miles' claims were being made nonetheless; an example being at the Royal Show in Warwickshire where a representative from the Muller dairy company spent two days urging the crowd to buy the company's yoghurt. The product had a low carbon footprint since most of its milk was sourced from within an hour's drive of the factory, the crowd was told. This might have been a catchy promotional strategy, but in terms of carbon footprint measurement it appeared simplistic.



Tim Fulton reported back to his fellow agricultural journalists at the Guild's 50th anniversary conference in Wellington in October 2008.

This was confirmed to me at the Royal Show by a presentation from a British academic who listed a range of ways to measure carbon footprints, some of which have only been identified in the past 2-3 years. This emphasized to me that carbon science and the communication of that information is an emerging field, and also that if New Zealand food exporters can benefit from carbon footprint concerns if they can meet accepted international standards.

In the current British retail environment, where shoppers are increasingly conscious of cost, New Zealand product could make itself more attractive by being competitive on food and environmental sustainability all at once. My conclusion from the trip was therefore that the carbon footprint and the food mile therefore, offer New Zealand opportunities if they are communicated in an accurate and sophisticated way.

I would very much like to thank the UK-NZ Link Foundation and the NZ Guild of Agricultural Journalists and Communicators for making the trip possible and for their help in making interview and travel arrangements. It was greatly appreciated.

If I had one recommendation for future Fellowships, it would be to consider a larger grant, to allow applicants to spend longer time away. As my financial records indicate, I was comfortably able to spend two weeks in the UK on the grant provided, but three weeks or any longer might have been at my own expense. I hope this can be taken as a practical recommendation for future trips.

All of my stories from the trip have been published in July 2008 issues of The New Zealand Farmers Weekly, ranging from features to an editorial. The stories I submit here cannot be taken as a definitive analysis but I enjoyed writing them and plan to continue covering this subject in detail, here in New Zealand and hopefully one day again on a trip to Britain.

Sincerely, Tim Fulton

Editor, The New Zealand Farmers Weekly