

**NEWS RELEASE**  
**Scottish Tenant Farmers Association**  
**Culmaily Farm**  
**Golspie**  
**Sutherland**  
[stfa@tfa.org.uk](mailto:stfa@tfa.org.uk)  
[angusmccall@aol.com](mailto:angusmccall@aol.com)

19<sup>th</sup> August 2008

**STFA CALLS FOR ACTION TO REPOPULATE HILLS AND GLENS**

In response to mounting evidence that Scotland's hills and glens will be subject to yet another year of falling incomes, the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association (STFA) is urging the Scottish Government to target increased support measures to realise the potential of livestock hill farming and to encourage new entrants to repopulate Scotland's deserted hills and glens.

Sheep production in the Highlands and Islands, which, for the better part of two centuries, has underpinned the rural economy, is heading towards meltdown as sales of hill lambs continue to give sellers returns well below the cost of production. The scale of the threat facing hill farming was recently highlighted by the SAC report "Retreat from the Hills" which revealed that over the last decade, sheep numbers have declined dramatically, most notably in the North West with many areas seeing a fall in sheep numbers of between 35% - 60% against a backdrop of a reduction of 22% in the national flock. Indeed, it is possible to cross the county of Sutherland, home of the North Country Cheviot, without seeing a sheep. The picture with cattle is more complex, but numbers have declined, by as much as 12% in some areas. Cattle and sheep provide a vital reservoir of breeding animals and are also an important source of store animals for fattening on the better land.

Unless arrested, this reduction in agricultural activity will have long-term repercussions on the rural community, the local economy, and also on the environment. The steady encroachment of ragwort and other noxious weeds, falling dykes, empty cottages, steadings and sheep fanks bear testimony to the decline in the countryside with falling stock numbers.

In the report SAC emphasises the important contribution that livestock farming makes in remote areas to the wider rural economy in providing employment, supporting downstream businesses and maintaining and enhancing the environment which in turn encourages national industries such as tourism to flourish. Components of rural infrastructure such as B&B's, self catering, petrol pumps, village shops and post offices all suffer when people and animals leave and the hills return to the wild.

Traditionally stock farming in the less favoured areas has been the route into agriculture for young entrants who have worked their way up the ladder from a small tenanted hill farm to a larger unit on better land. Despite the fragile nature of hill farming and its'

dependence on support mechanisms to survive, STFA believes these opportunities still exist for new entrants if they could get access to land in the depopulated glens.

Chairman Angus McCall said: “The Scottish Rural Development Programme presents an opportunity to target support towards the rural areas most in need and if we can devise a robust new entrant scheme there is every chance that a future can be secured for young people in Scotland’s more remote areas. Such measures are successfully used in France to arrest rural depopulation where young farmers are valued and welcomed into the rural lifestyle.

“We must reverse the retreat from the hills and create opportunities for ambitious young people so that they can initiate new businesses based on farming and supported by innovative, diversified enterprises such as eco-tourism and new extreme outdoor sports. These present fresh economic opportunities complimentary to the wilder environment of hill farming. As the Scottish countryside becomes more accessible to city dwellers and these new more youthful activities gain popularity, they also must be invested in and catered for alongside the traditional, more elitist activities of hunting, shooting and fishing of highland estates.

“I believe that it is morally incumbent on owners of these vast empty spaces to make land available to new farmers at affordable rents so that they can make their contribution to the wider fragile rural economy. Repopulation of these deserted areas must be a national priority and large estates should be accountable to such public policy.

“There are large areas of land in Scotland under public ownership and STFA has called upon the Scottish Government to identify such land which could be made available new entrants. In the post war era, smallholdings were created to provide an entry into agriculture. The government and larger estates should look to reviving this policy. The Forestry Commission, for instance, is in possession of blocks of unplanted land that could be returned to agriculture.

“With government leadership and properly targeted support through the SRDP, a whole new generation of young farmers could emerge and revitalise Scotland’s empty hills and glens. Scotland is there for everyone, so let’s start making best use of it. Our young blood and fragile communities are being deprived opportunities and Scotland is losing out on huge untapped potential. The debate so far has been long on words and it is now high time for some action”

For further information contact:

Angus McCall  
Tel: 014078 633275  
Mob: 07767 756840

