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UK farm renewables challenges echoed across Europe

Paul Bray
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Farmers across Europe are wrestling with the same pluses and pitfalls of renewable energy, according to researchers.



Speaking at last month's All-Energy exhibition and conference in Aberdeen, researchers from the city's James Hutton Institute compared renewable energy production in Aberdeenshire, the Wendland-Elbetal region of Germany, and Vysocina in the Czech Republic.

A common issue in all three countries was opposition from local communities and pressure groups, said senior social scientist Lee-Ann Sutherland.

Anti-AD protestors objected to maize monoculture and potential smell, while in the Czech Republic people got particularly irate about the effect of renewables subsidies on overall energy prices, she said.

"Recently we've found that Scottish farmers have become much more proactive in working with their local communities, especially talking about their plans ahead of time and on a one-to-one basis," said Dr Sutherland.

All three countries seemed to face the same perceived problem of "saturation" before renewables technologies had been implemented on the majority of farms - owing as much to public acceptance as to physical limitations.

In addition, technology and installation costs were rising, subsidies were being squeezed, competition from energy companies was growing, and profits were by no means assured, she said.

"It's not like many technologies, where the pioneers take the risks and the followers reap the rewards. We're witnessing something of a 'bandwagon effect', but farmers need to be careful not to jump on without being very sure of the business case."

Comparing the three countries

In Germany and the Czech Republic anaerobic digestion predominated, and, in contrast to the UK, biogas technology there had mostly been developed on farms. Germany now had more than 7,000 anaerobic digesters and the Czech Republic 260, of which 95% were farm-based, said Dr Sutherland.

"Many farmers see biogas production as a way of 'future-proofing' their farms," she said.

Selling electricity into the grid and waste heat to local homes created a more diversified income, and "free" fertiliser and heating for greenhouses reduced farmers' exposure to spiralling prices.

However, AD could fundamentally change the use of a farm, especially if maize was grown in quantity to feed the digester.

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