**SQC**

**Agronomist & Arable Farmer**

**Teresa Dougall Op Ed**

**Earlier this year, Teresa Dougall took over the reins of Scottish Quality Crops (SQC) as its Managing Director. Having worked previously as Director of Regions for NFU Scotland and at Scottish Land and Estates, Teresa has broad experience in strategic planning and lobbying for rural businesses and membership organisations. Here she tells us more about building a positive brand around Crop Assurance and supporting growers to access rewarding markets.**

There’s always a pressure when it comes to Quality Assurance. Growers, however efficient, can anticipate it as inconvenient or a burden and assessors need great diligence to ensure they haven’t missed any detail in the process. This often means there are negative connotations around QA, but what I’d like to see is it positively recognised for the opportunities it creates for growers.

SQC is an independent cooperative made up of seven farming and associated industry partners, from farmers to millers and distillers, and we’re all looking for the same: quality markets for a quality product.

Our mission, via the SQC hallmark of quality, is to **place Scotland's combinable crops at the premium end of the UK and European markets, to** add value to growers’ businesses and maximise cost-effective access to multiple market opportunities as well as to premiums.

Those premiums are becoming ever more important with worryingly high input costs, an unclear future agricultural policy and pressure to ‘grow greener’. Farmers are having to think differently about how they manage crops. In this lies opportunity.

Markets are increasingly seeking sustainability credentials and as wider conversations grow around nutritional value, there will be an opening to leverage the provenance and nutritional assets of Scotland-grown cereals.

This matters to whisky distillers who trade on their provenance and, as consumers become more aware of the impact their food choices have on the environment, this may become more central to other grain products on retail shelves. Biofuels is also an ever-growing market which is supporting cereal prices.

The SQC logo provides reassurance and confidence to end users and intermediate processors that they are buying a safe, traceable, environmentally responsible product from Scotland. A central focus going forward for SQC is how to best demonstrate growers’ green credentials as part of their Crop Assurance, in order to give Scottish-grown grain more influence in an increasingly environmentally conscious market.

Audits, however much of a hassle they can seem, are a necessary process to guarantee markets. SQC has always worked hard to maintain a sensible, pragmatic approach to assurance. We want to work with farmers to give them the assets to leverage greater opportunities rather than trying to catch them out.

The board and I are currently looking at how the standards are reviewed to ensure they remain simple, relevant and to make them more transparent for the wider industry to streamline and avoid duplication across quality assurance assessors. Earlier this year we appointed Food Integrity Assurance (FIA\*) as SQC’s independent certification body, and, for example, with Quality Meat Scotland (QMS) having also engaged FIA for its quality assurance certification, there is potential for joint audits.

Another key priority is reapplying for silver status with SAI Global, to re-benchmark Scotland’s standard against Europe and maintain access to a wide range of markets.

Being a cooperative comprising of partners from across the whole supply chain – and who also sit on our Board of Directors – gives me vital access to expertise and guidance from across the sector. I am currently working with the board to finalise a new five-year strategy to continue the fantastic work that has been undertaken to date.

First established in 1994 and rebranded as Scottish Quality Crops in 2007, the next stage for the coop is to develop its reputation as a modern progressive organisation, demonstrating leadership in sustainability and Quality Assurance standards in crop production and supporting members in the same; and, importantly, to be fully integrated at all stages of the supply chain. I would also like our members to communicate more with us – to allow us to continually improve and directly address any concerns they have.

The simple, streamlined structure of SQC makes change, progress and growth that much easier and I was particularly attracted to this role as it’s one in which I can see where we can grow opportunity for farmers and support them to embrace it.

I look forward to driving the coop forward in interesting times ahead, making it more visible, strengthening industry relationships and securing opportunities for Scotland’s growers as markets change.

**SQC is a co-operative formed of farming and associated industry partners, funded by growers and with a Board of Directors and executive committee which works with the Managing Director, the only paid position in the cooperative.**

* + National Farmers Union of Scotland
	+ Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society
	+ Agricultural Industries Confederation
	+ Scotland’s Rural College
	+ Scotch Whisky Association
	+ Maltsters Association of Great Britain
	+ Association of British Millers

\*FIA provides independent assessment and certification services to SQC’s assurance programme

For more on SQC see [www.sqcrops.co.uk](http://www.sqcrops.co.uk)