

Diocese of Hereford, Chaplain for Agriculture & Rural Life

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Dear Colleague

Harvest Briefing 2007

A few notes which I hope may be helpful in your conversations with farmers and form a background to this year's Harvest Festivals.

The vulnerability of our food supply

The last few months have demonstrated, once again, the vulnerability of our food supply in spite of the technology that underpins modern agricultural production. Whilst not on a par with the situation in 2001, the compound effect of floods and the recent foot and mouth scare have both affected the economics of agriculture.

The relentlessness of this year's summer rainfall has been quite exceptional, affecting both growing crops and the ability, at the time, to collect milk and other produce from farms. Waterlogged ground has delayed the harvest and second cut silage, for example, was particularly hard hit. Other crops, such as oil seed rape, were at a vulnerable stage prior to cutting. In addition to losses of the crops in the grounds, others will be affected in the coming winter by the shortage of fodder and straw resulting from the floods and delayed harvest. In response, some of the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) have promoted hardship grants and the ARC-Addington Fund has established a fodder and straw bank for those in need. Arable farmers are encouraged not to chop wheat straw as concerns grow over short supplies.

The restrictions imposed as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak in August not only affected the sale and movement of cattle, but also other farming practices such as muck spreading, the work of agricultural contractors etc. Fortunately the threat of the disease is now at an end from this outbreak, and restrictions are being lifted, but the knock-on effect to ancillary industries, shows and events should not be underestimated.

The good news is that grain prices are rising, wheat and barley are selling for about £70 more per tonne this year than last, however this will also have a knock-on effect for livestock farmers as the price of their inputs will also rise by up to £40 a tonne. There will be price rises of food in the shops as the harvest totals are certain to be less than anticipated. Also, recent announcements by the supermarkets, especially Asda, suggests that pressure on farmgate prices will intensify in spite of this, to quote - Asda "will continue to lower prices aggressively" in the pursuit of market share.

And the next twelve months.....

The next twelve months are likely to see further intensification of the debate about agriculture's contribution to global warming, both negative and positive. There are plans for tougher rules on pesticide use in order to improve water quality, by extending Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZs) from 55% to 70% of English farmland. Fertiliser spread within NVZs is more strictly controlled

than outside, including maximum limits on inputs. The European Union is also proposing tighter controls on pesticide usage across the EU, with suggested targets to reduce pesticides by 25% within 5 years and 50% by 2020. A vote on the proposals is likely this month. Agriculture is also at the cross roads about the positive contribution it might make to global warming through sustainable energy crops. The switch of arable crops from the human and animal food chain to energy is one of the pressures on rising grain prices, just how realistic it is to expect to “grow” energy in large quantities is a growing debate.

Finally, the problems with bovine TB continue to be unresolved. The prevalence of the disease increased 19% during the first six months of 2007, compared to 2006, and is now on a par with that seen in 2005 which was the worst year on record. The number of herds under movement restrictions by mid August rose by 7% to 6,540 and 14,147 cattle have been slaughtered during this year to date.

Key telephone numbers (and suggestions for Harvest Festival collections)

- **Farm Crisis Network** (www.farminghelp.org.uk or 07002 326 326) provides pastoral and practical support as well as advice about other schemes
- **The ARC-Addington Fund** (02476 690 587). Cash grant schemes have been available for business costs e.g. if stock have had to be housed and are eating winter fodder
- **Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI)** implemented its emergency procedures to ensure that all requests for help from farming families facing financial hardship as a result of the foot and mouth movement restrictions were processed without delay. The RABI emergency helpline number is 01865 727 888, the office number is 01865 724 931.
- **Samaritans** helpline number 08457 909 090

A final reminder – and useful resources

The year of food and farming (see earlier briefings) includes a website www.yearoffoodandfarming.org.uk, to be launched during British Food Fortnight (22nd September to 7th October), now in its sixth year, which celebrates the diverse range of food from Great Britain. Details of activities around the country, and of recipes and advice on healthy eating, are available on www.britishfoodfortnight.co.uk, or phone 020 7840 9292.

A further initiative, Farmers’ Weekly “Kids Connect” campaign was launched at the Royal Show, aimed at helping children make connections with where their food comes from. It involves giving them the facts and figures and encouraging farmers to host moiré school visits, and get themselves invited into the classroom. The website is www.kidsconnectcampaign.co.uk.

Liturgical material is available from the Arthur Rank Centre website: www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk

I hope this is helpful,

Nick Read