

Diocese of Hereford Agriculture & Rural Life

Serving the Church of England in Herefordshire,
South Shropshire & parts of Powys & Worcestershire



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

Dear Colleague

May 2008

A few notes which I hope may be helpful in your conversations with farmers.

Bluetongue update

Bluetongue vaccination is expected to be available from early May though vets on the Continent have reported that the *culicoides* midge, which carries the virus, have become increasingly active with the warm weather. The vaccination programme, which is voluntary, will be implemented in phases as the vaccine will be made available on a county-by-county basis. The first areas to be treated will be those where the disease has been known to be circulating and where epidemiological evidence suggests a risk, this is largely the mid and Eastern part of England. Counties at risk from animal movements (i.e. close to known sites of infection or at risk from windborne spread of the midges, and with high numbers of stock) will be next. The West of England remains a low priority area though defra has warned that this may change rapidly if the disease spreads. The cost will be 55-66p a dose for 50-dose bottles and 82-98p a dose for 20-dose bottles of the vaccine *Bovilis BTV8*.

There is an industry-wide initiative called JAB (Joint Campaign Against Bluetongue) which is encouraging producers to vaccinate stock – an 80% uptake is required for the vaccine to be effective in controlling the spread of the disease, and posters are available with the message “don’t hesitate – vaccinate”. To obtain posters contact temp.se@nfu.org.uk and stipulate the number of A3 or A4 copies, state BT postcards and posters in the email. Wales has also ordered 2.5m doses of the vaccine and Scotland will have a compulsory vaccination programme, probably this winter with taxpayers paying 50% of the cost. The experience of the Netherlands in 2007 indicates the impact of the disease; more than 30% of the national flock was infected and 6% of the country's sheep died as a result. Between 10-20% of the cattle were infected, with total mortality of 1% of the national herd. The number of sick animals was more than 1.35m sheep, 3.8m cattle and 280,000 goats and the total economic impact was put at 81m euros.

Further relaxation of BSE controls

The EU Commission has relaxed the rules governing the sale of beef on the bone, as further evidence that progress is being made against “mad cow disease” (BSE). Until now the vertebral column had to be removed from UK carcasses that were more than 24 months old. This limit has been raised to 30 months which gives a welcome boost to the industry as significant numbers of cattle reach their optimal weight between 24 and 30 months of age and removing the bones raised processing costs and restricted consumer choice for bone-in cuts.

Pig industry update

Although prices have risen in recent weeks the pig industry continues to experience a crisis situation as banks reduce their lending. High numbers of sows are being culled (70,000 in the first quarter of 2008 compared to 49,000 for the same period in 2007) suggesting that more farmers are leaving the sector. Most analysts suggest that a break-even price is 140p/kg deadweight, compared to recent market prices of 118p/kg. This contrasts with the optimism currently enjoyed by the arable sector which has seen an improvement in returns, and this is reflected in the high demand for agricultural land. The average value of English farmland has risen by 12% in the first quarter of 2008 to £4,621/acre.

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Food issues

The Country Land and Business Association surveyed 100 large scale organisations and companies to establish what determines their food procurement policies. Whilst more than 80% of dairy products bought are of British origin, overall only 2% of food procured by the public sector is "local" food. Cost pressures on procurement were the major factor and pork and chicken, in particular, lose to foreign imports. However the survey also reveals that local suppliers are often unable to meet contractual requirements for volume and quality. The report coincides with good news for the free range egg sector where surveys reveal that free range eggs account for more than half of the retail market value of the egg industry, and 40% of the total numbers sold.

A survey of food suppliers by the accountants Grant Thornton has highlighted the need to demonstrate environmental credentials in order to win supermarket contracts. Of the 70 suppliers surveyed more than a third had explained their environmental performance when tendering for contracts and 46% had been approached by the retailers to discuss ways of improving their sustainability. Supermarkets were increasingly aware of public interest in food miles and carbon footprints. However, there remains a lack of clear standards that apply throughout the food sector.

TB update

The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has approved a plan by 38 votes to 12 to eradicate bovine TB that includes a limited cull of badgers in a pilot area known to be a disease hotspot. The plan also involves testing all cattle on Welsh farms, tighter rules for cattle movements, and the faster removal of cattle that test positively ("reactors"). In 2007 7,905 reactors were slaughtered in Wales (compared to less than 700 in 1997) costing £15.2m in compensation. The compensation bill may exceed £30m by 2012 and this is of major concern to WAG. Killing badgers would remain illegal outside of the designated areas. However, the detailed proposals are unlikely to take effect before the Autumn and the Badger Trust is seeking permission to start judicial proceedings against WAG to quash the cull.

Electronic Identification (EID) of sheep

The EU continues to plan the introduction of EID for sheep from 2010, in spite of protests from farming organisations who are concerned about the cost and practicability of the proposals. English and Welsh farming unions point out that the current system of ear tagging already enables traceability of all animals.

Tenant sector faces rent increases

Tenant farmers' representatives indicate that the tenanted sector is facing a significant rise in rental demands as commodity prices improve. Tenant agreements in the East of England under the Agricultural Holdings Act (AHA), which requires 12 months notice of a review, had shown an average rise in rents of 31% from Michaelmas 2006 (with the review taking effect by Michaelmas 2007). The magazine Farmers Weekly, in association with the Tenant Farmers Association and the NFU, are conducting a rent review survey throughout 2008 to help achieve fair rent settlements. The survey can be obtained via www.fwi.co.uk/rentreviews or by telephoning 020 8652 4911. The website also contains more information about the rent review process.

A final reminder - Open Farm Sunday

Open Farm Sunday will be on 1st June 2008. In 2007 400 farms participated and attracted 150,000 visitors. The event is being organised by LEAF and further details are available on www.farmsunday.org.

Best wishes,

Nick Read