

Diocese of Hereford Environment, Agriculture & Rural Life

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



Dear Colleague

October Briefing 2009

A few notes which I hope might be helpful in your dealings with farmers.

Early Harvest returns

Defra's provisional June census results suggest the English wheat acreage is 1.7m ha (4.2m acres), 13% down on the previous year and the NFU estimates that average wheat yields will be 7.68t/ha (3.1t/acre) resulting in a crop of 12.9 tonnes, 3m tonnes lower than 2008. However there are still 5m tonnes in storage after a record harvest last year.

Pig numbers rise

The English breeding pig herd has grown by 22,000 more breeding sows (6%) over 2008, bringing it close to 2007 levels, suggesting a welcome recovery in the pig sector.

Single Farm Payment scheme

Defra has confirmed that there is a new minimum size of holding required to be eligible for the Single Farm Payment (SFP) which is 1ha (2.471 acres). This is also the time of year (30th September) when the exchange rate between the pound and the euro is fixed which provides the conversion factor for SFP payments for the next twelve months. Since sterling has slumped to a five-month low (the euro is worth 90p compared to 85p at the beginning of August) British farmers stand to gain when SFP payments are made from December onwards. Each euro will be worth c90p to farmers, compared to the 79p they were worth in September 2008.

Dairy update

Estimates by the farm business consultants Andersons suggest that the SFP and money from agri-environment schemes (Entry Level Scheme – ELS) will be the major contributors to any profit within the dairy sector as milk prices continue to be squeezed. The margins on milk production from their "model" Friesian Farm, based on 100ha with 150 milking cows, suggests a loss of 1.3p/litre until the offset of 2.5p/litre from SFP and ELS is added. However in the longer term they forecast that dairy prices will improve.

Bovine TB update

The government has again ruled out a cull of badgers to help control bovine TB in England, though both the Lib Dems and the Conservatives have indicated that they would allow a badger cull if in power, though farmers may be asked to contribute to the cost. The EU Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFCAH) has declared Scotland to be "Officially Tuberculosis-Free" (OTF).

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The annual report of the government's Chief Veterinary Officer, Nigel Gibbons, highlighted the devastating impact TB was having on the industry and stated that £94.7m had been spent on attempts to control the disease during 2008. Provisional year-end statistics showed an 18.9% increase in the number of new incidents recorded in Great Britain during the year compared to 2007, the bulk of these in the west of England and in Wales.

E coli and farm visits

Godstone farm in Surrey, a tourist attraction, has been the centre of an E coli outbreak leading to 67 children falling ill. The strain of bacteria, 0157, is the most common strain to cause disease in humans, but has no effect on animals. Three other farms in the UK have also been closed. The Health Protection Agency is investigating the outbreaks. However organisations that promote farm visits have stressed that E coli outbreaks are extremely rare.

GM and animal feed

Mariann Fischer Boel, the EU Agricultural Commissioner, has indicated that livestock farmers will face a feed crisis unless the EU relaxes its strict rules on importing genetically modified crops, and especially for imported stocks of soya. A report by Defra and the Food Standards Agency has indicated that feed costs could increase by 30% if the ban is maintained, leading to a reduction in both pig and poultry production.

RPA to be reviewed

The Rural Payments Agency (RPA), which administers over 60 different schemes and delivers £2bn per year in payments to 120,000 English farmers, is to be subject to a government review, chaired by the Defra Director-General for Food and farming Katrina Williams. The review will identify areas for improvement and make recommendations by March next year. In response the RPA points out that it has met government targets for customer satisfaction for 2008/9 of 6.5/10 with a target for 2009/10 of 7/10.

Harvest Festival resources

A reminder that Sunday 4th October has been designated as "Animal Welfare Sunday" and the RSPCA and Church of England are suggesting that churches use this to highlight the effects of climate change on biodiversity. The RSPCA has published a "Service for Animal Welfare", available on www.rspca.org.uk/animalwelfaresunday. It is also designated as a day of prayer for the forthcoming conference on climate change. Further resources are available at www.christian-ecology.org.uk/day-of-prayer.htm or www.ctbi.org.uk

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) are promoting agricultural safety as harvest is the most dangerous period for agriculturally-related accidents. They have launched a "Make the Promise" (to come home safe) campaign and farmers are being asked to show support for this by displaying a "Promise Knot" on their lapel. The Arthur Rank Centre is asking that church communities might help reinforce the message. Details are available on the HSE website www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/makethepromise

I hope this is helpful,

Nick