

The Chaplain for Agriculture & Rural Life, Hereford Diocese

The Rev'd Nick Read OBE ARAgS

The Rectory, Pembridge, Hereford HR6 9EB

Mobile: 07973 361 055

e-mail: agchap@tiscali.co.uk

Dear Colleague,

September 2005 Agricultural Briefing

A few notes which I hope will be helpful in your dealings with the farming community.

Dairy industry figures a cause of concern

A Defra-commissioned report by Manchester University found that 45 farms out of 363 first studied in 2003 have ceased milking. More than 10% of those quitting had herds of 150+ and almost 20% had 100-149 cows. At the time it was predicted that the "worst case" scenario was 15.6% of dairy farmers leaving the industry by 2007. The recent study suggests that 12.9% have already left, and that the figures need to be revised upwards. The industry has also expressed its concern that even though supermarket retails prices for milk have increased by up to 3.5p/litre, less than 1p/litre has been passed on to producers.

TB update

The Welsh Assembly has established a telephone hotline for farmers caught up in the worsening TB crisis. Between January and May 2005 5.5% of Welsh farms were under TB restrictions. The hotline number is 0800 528 3300. Defra has published data from its Road Traffic Accident survey of dead badgers which found, on average, that one in seven was infected with bovine TB. The survey involved the collection of dead badgers during 2002-4 in seven English counties, including Herefordshire and Shropshire. However the data are difficult to interpret, badgers collected in Herefordshire and Shropshire had higher incidences of bovine TB than in the West Country, even though the incidence of infection in cattle is higher in the South West. A pilot programme to enable lay TB cattle testing in England is to start in September, involving up to 11,000 tests.

Fuel prices rise and debt increases

The high price of crude oil is hitting farm prices. The average price for a litre of "red diesel" (diesel with a red dye in it to show that it has a lower tax bracket, but which can only be used for agricultural purposes) is 34.5p/litre, compared with 22p/litre at the beginning of 2005. Bank of England figures show that farm debt rose during the second quarter of 2005. Lending rose to £8.75 billion, 2% up on the previous three months and 4.5% higher than in the same period in 2004.

Hunting latest

The Divisional Court has dismissed the application by the Countryside Alliance for a judicial review of the Hunting Act on Human Right grounds (see August briefing). The court decided that it was within the rational, proportionate and democratic competence of Parliament to pass the Act and that intervention by the Courts was not required. The Countryside Alliance has indicated it will appeal against the decision.

Accident statistics

Farming fatalities rose dramatically, with 42 deaths in the 12 months to April 2005 compared with 23 in the previous twelve months. The Health and Safety Executive suggest that the wet weather was a contributory factor as farmers cut corners in the race to plant and harvest.

All-Party Parliamentary Group on hill farming

Following recent concern on the future of hill farming (see earlier briefings), the Lib Dem MP for Westmoreland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) has established an All-party Parliamentary Group on the subject, aiming to promote and protect hill farming interests in the UK.

Age a challenge to agriculture

The increasing average age of farmers presents a challenge to its sustainability, according to the “State of the Countryside Report” published by the Commission for Rural Communities. 60% of farmers are over the age of 55 (compared to 49% in 1990). As farm incomes continue to be pressured more farmers are signing up for agri-environmental schemes; land under these has risen from 650,000ha in 1999 to 1.17m ha in 2005.

Harvest reminders

“Farm, food and countryside” is produced by a group called the Voice of British Agriculture. It is very user-friendly, contains interesting facts and figures and is suitable for all ages. Copies are available from VOBA, The Pump House, Wigborough Wisk, St Osyth, Essex CO16 8ER. The website is www.voiceofbritishagriculture.com. Copies are free but you are asked to pay for postage @ £3.50 for ten copies; £8 for 50 and £10 for 100.

The Charity “*Harvest Help*”, has a harvest pack called “*Sharing the Fruit*” with a full order of service, sermon and ideas for music as well as fundraising, drama and suggestions for children’s activities. Packs are free, contact Kevin Lawrence on 01952 260 699 or e-mail info@harvesthelp.org. Their website is available on www.harvesthelp.org

ROPE (“Relief for Oppressed People Everywhere”) offers to take services or lead discussions on topics relating to third world poverty. The website is www.ropo.org.uk and the contact is Tony Houghton, the Regional Co-ordinator, on 01235 765 535.

The Churches Rural group has produced a leaflet entitled “*Rural Migrant Workers – Modern Slavery?*” The leaflet surveys the issues and suggests ways in which churches may make a positive contribution to their welfare. Further details are available from the Arthur Rank Centre: www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk

If you are looking for a recipient of the Harvest Collection – please remember the Rural Support Network that actively supports farmers (and others) in rural areas suffering from stress. The network covers the five counties of the West Midlands Region and has active groups in both Herefordshire and Shropshire. Gift Aid declaration forms, and further details about the network’s activities, are available from: The Rural Support Network, Harper Adams University College, NPI Drive, Newport, Shropshire TF10 8JD. Tel: Helpline 0870 707 4445; Admin 01952 815 600.

I hope this helps!

Nick Read