

The Chaplain for Agriculture & Rural Life, Hereford Diocese

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Dear Colleague,

October 2005 Agricultural Briefing

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

TB update

A defra-funded pilot study on the cost benefit analysis of badger control found that increased badger culling from 60% to 80% had little effect on reducing the incidence of TB in cattle. In response to calls from the industry, including a letter signed by 419 current and retired vets asking the Secretary of State to consider badger culling as a means of controlling the spread of TB, the Independent Scientific Group (ISG) on cattle TB has claimed that to be effective area clearance would have to involve the elimination or virtual elimination of badgers from large areas of land over sustained periods of time. What is indisputable is that the number of cattle slaughtered due to bovine TB continues to rise. Up to July 31st 2005 18,805 animals had been slaughtered (equivalent to 90 cows a day), a 35% increase over the same period last year.

Avian flu update

A highly contagious strain of avian flue has been reported in parts of Russia and migrating birds are believed to be the cause of the infection. Some experts believe it is only a matter of time before the disease arrives in Western Europe and in response the Dutch government ordered all free-range flocks to be moved indoors until the end of the year. However, whilst EU veterinary experts have called for increased vigilance they have dismissed the enforced housing of free-range poultry as "disproportionate" to the current risks. Egg-producing birds would not lose their free-range status if moved indoors by compulsory order, though clarification is needed on the implication for meat birds. World Health Organisation experts are concerned that the spread of avian flue could trigger a flu pandemic in humans, leading to many deaths. The virus has already demonstrated its ability to cross the species barrier to infect humans.

Consultation on rules governing changes to farms

In an effort to give targeted protection to landscape and biodiversity, defra is currently consulting on new regulations aimed at controlling large scale restructuring projects such as the removal or addition of hedges, walls, fences, tracks and ditches. Farmers would need permission to carry out these whenever threshold limits are reached, such as more than 1km of removal or addition of hedges or fences within a sensitive area such as a national park or a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Different rules apply outside. Recontouring of agricultural land or the creation of lakes and reservoirs are also covered by the proposals. Defra's Rural Development Service would have the right to halt any work if it felt that environmental damage would result. The deadline for responses is November 14th.

Dairy industry figures update

Following the report in last month's briefing, a further analysis shows that UK dairy farmers have seen their share of the retail price for milk fall at a higher rate than their EU counterparts. In 1995 the UK farm gate price accounted for 58% of the retail price. By 2004 it had fallen to 39%, compared to 45% in France and 49% in Germany. UK dairy farmers receive about 2p per litre less than the EU average. Unsurprisingly the number of dairy farmers in the UK has fallen from 30,900 in 1999 to 21,800 in 2005.

End of Over Thirty Months Scheme in sight

A meeting of the Food Standards Agency in August has paved the way for the Over Thirty Months Scheme (OTMS) to be wound down and replaced by BSE testing. FSA agreed that an effective testing system, trialled between March and June, has now been developed. However, for a time the current OTMS will run in parallel with those abattoirs processing OTM cattle for the food chain in case there is under-capacity in the system. The proposed timetable suggests that older beef might be back in the shops by November. To date, OTMS has cost more than £3 billion. The BSE testing regime is expected to cost about £60 million per year.

Rural housing latest

House prices have risen more sharply in rural than in urban areas. The average house price in the countryside was £85,308 in 1994. Ten years later it had risen by 171% to £231,053. This compares with a 166% rise in urban areas, from £73,960 to £197,051. Only 13% of the rural housing stock is social housing, compared to 22% in urban areas. In addition, 1.4% of the rural housing stock is accounted for by second homes, four and a half times greater than in urban areas.

The final reminders for Harvest

“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.rope.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