

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@btinternet.com

Dear Colleague,

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

Defra to face court action

The Foot & Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak in 2001 was reputed to have started from a swill processing site at Heddon-on-the-Wall where Trading Standards found evidence of poor hygiene and bio-security. Swill processors take waste food and turn it into feed for pigs – a beneficial use of the 1.7m tonnes of waste food that is otherwise put into landfill every year. As a result of FMD, 62 other swill feeders were closed down, even though there was no evidence that they were not operating properly and there was never any evidence of FMD on the other premises. They received no compensation at the time and have waited before bringing a case against Defra until the publication of the Parliamentary Ombudsman's report on Defra's handling of the pig swill ban. However, the Ombudsman's report, started in October 2003 has been consistently delayed and the swill processors will soon face having any claim barred under the Statute Bar, which prohibits legal action more than six years after an alleged transgression. Consequently the producers have filed a claim against Defra with the backing of agricultural organisations.

Energy matters

The European Union is raising the targets for renewable energy. Currently, the EU has a target that 2% of road fuel should be sourced from bio-energy, rising to 5.75% by 2010. However, the latest proposals tabled in Brussels in early January would raise the target to 20% by 2020. However, there is doubt that even the 5.75% target will be met at the moment.

Marks and Spencers has announced a major commitment to becoming an ecologically friendly retailer. By 2012 it wants to become carbon neutral and send none of its waste to landfill, it wants to extend the sourcing of its products from sustainable producers and to set new standards on ethical trading. Food that is imported by air will be labelled accordingly and there will be trial plants to use food waste as sources of bio-energy.

Oxford Farming Conference

This year's Oxford Farming Conference was used as a venue by the two Davids (David Cameron and David Milliband) to outline their respective party's views on the future for UK agriculture. Both emphasised the importance of the environment, the challenge of climate change, the over-burden of regulation and the need for further reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Perhaps the latter was the most significant statement yet that the UK government, of whatever political colour, would argue for full decoupling of the CAP so that in future public money was used to support public goods i.e. environmental issues, rather than to support production. These are significant statements as the Common Agricultural Policy is due to receive a "health check" (Euro-jargon for a review) in 2008, that will help determine the future shape of the CAP when the current budget provision ends in 2013.

Also at the conference, the NFU announced that they would publish a “responsibility index” of retailers’ behaviour which measured their involvement in dedicated supply chains, their relationships with their suppliers, and their commitment to buying British produce.

Organic sector continues to grow

Latest figures show a 30% annual growth for UK organic food and drink, amounting to £1.6bn. Overall the demand for food is relatively static (or “inelastic” in economic jargon), growing 2-3% annually, thus the growth in the organic sector is a major trend. Nevertheless it still accounts for only 5% of farmed land in the UK, and only 30% of primary organic produce sold in the UK was grown in the UK, though that includes products that could not be grown here anyway (e.g. organic bananas). 70% of the produce sold that can be grown here, is grown here.

One of the consequences of the rapid growth in demand for organic produce, and the poor European harvest, is that organic feed supplies for cattle and sheep are running out and some producers may have to downgrade stock to conventional feedstuffs. One possibility is to reduce the organic content of feedstuffs as a temporary measure, but the Soil Association is opposed to the proposal feeling that it would undermine the integrity of organic produce.

Polytunnels in the spotlight

A recent High Court ruling has addressed whether large scale polytunnels can be considered as temporary or permanent structures. Farmers enjoy “Permitted Development Rights” (PDR) for some farm structures, which means that they do not have to apply for full planning permission, on the grounds that the structures are necessary for efficient agriculture and they do not present a major or irreversible change of use. What is less clear is how the scale of the activity under question affects the issue. Thus greenhouses, for example, would require planning permission, but Spanish-style polytunnels would normally be considered as temporary structures and fall within PDR. However, a recent case in the High Court concerned a large scale polytunnel unit sited on a farm in Surrey, where it was judged to fall outside of permitted development and require full planning permission. The farmer has been ordered to dismantle the unit. It is not yet clear what precedent this sets for other producers, but it is felt to be a significant legal development.

Using the web

The European Union Commissioner for Agriculture, Mariann Fischer Boel, has launched her own “blog” on the internet. A blog is essentially an electronic diary to which others can add their comments. Her first posting was on globalisation and European agriculture. The blog can be accessed via blogs.ec.europa.eu/fischer-boel

I hope this helps,

Nick Read