

Diocese of Hereford, Chaplain for Agriculture & Rural Life
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Dear Colleague

May Briefing

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

Waste regulation deadline

Farmers have an exemption under new waste regulations to allow them to continue to lay waste paper as animal bedding, use tyres to weigh down silage clamps, burn hedge trimmings etc., but only if they register by 15th May. Concern has been expressed by the Environment Agency that the numbers applying for exemption are lower than expected. The same deadline (15th May) applies to this year's application for the Single Farm Payment scheme (Form SP5). Claimants who miss the 15th May deadline will be subject to penalties worth 1% of their SFP per working day late, and any applications received after 9th June will be ineligible.

Farming update in Wales.

In advance of the Welsh Assembly Government elections in May, the Farmers Union of Wales has called for a dedicated rural affairs minister (the current system links farming with the environment and planning). This call comes at a time when the total income from farming in Wales was shown to have dropped during 2006 by £44m, 29% down on the previous year. Much of the downturn was attributed to the drop in the value of milk and milk products during the year.

Anti-smoking legislation

Farmers, like the rest of the country, will be caught by the new anti-smoking legislation. No smoking signs must be displayed at entrances to premises from 1st July and company vehicles and tractors used by more than one person should also have no smoking signs. Farm workers need to be informed how the legislation will affect them. Although the law does not cover private dwellings it does cover the farm office, even if the office is within the farm house. The law applies where members of the public attend to deliver or receive goods and services, including sales reps, agronomists, vets etc.

Competition Enquiry update

In May 2006 the Office of Fair Trading asked the Competition Commission to conduct an enquiry into the grocery trade (see earlier briefings), to investigate whether there has been a prevention, restriction or distortion of competition into the grocery market. The publication of the final report has been delayed until February 2008 because of the growing weight of evidence being submitted by suppliers, processors and supermarkets. However there is still concern that the amount of evidence submitted by farmers is small in comparison to the total, and the majority has come from dairy farmers. Further information is available on the website www.competition-commission.org.uk and evidence can be submitted via e-mail: groceries@cc.gsi.gov.uk

Farmland prices continue to rise

The rural property market continues to rise. Prices for farmland in England hit record levels in the first quarter of 2007, rising by 6% on the previous quarter and 14% on the year. The average price for an acre of arable land was £3,353, whilst pasture sold for an average of £3,103 per acre. However, the buoyancy of the market is attributed as much to the state of the UK economy than to the state of farming or the quality of land available. Investors and lifestyle buyers made a significant contribution to demand.

Defra livestock survey

The annual UK livestock survey has just been published, and the numbers show that:

- Dairy cow numbers have fallen by almost 20% since 1997, from 2,498,000 to 2,024,000, though the rate of decline appears to be slowing down (1.6% year-on-year between 2005-6).
- Beef numbers have fallen by 13% since 1997, from 1,873,000 to 1,662,000, though a predicted shrinkage due to the decoupling of farm support and the introduction of the Single Farm payment has not happened and numbers remained stable for 2005 (1,667,000) and 2006 (1,662,000).
- Breeding ewes have declined by 25% from 20,028,000 in 1997 to 14,964,000 in 2006.
- There has been a slight improvement in the numbers of breeding pigs over the last year, from 522,000 in 2005 to 542,000 in 2006 though this is still 43% lower than in 1997 (956,000).

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee

The EFRA Select Committee published a report at the end of March on the way defra handled the introduction of the Single Farm Payment (see earlier briefings). The ensuing debacle is estimated to have cost the farming industry up to £22.5m in higher interest rates etc., and defra has had to allocate £131m in its 2005-06 accounts for fines from the European Commission. To date only one person has lost their job over the issue, the Chief Executive of the Rural Payments Agency at the time. However the EFRA Select Committee has recommended that consideration needs to be given to holding others to account for these failures including the then Secretary of State, Margaret Beckett (now Foreign Secretary), the former Permanent Secretary at defra, Sir Brian Bender, (now at the Department of Trade and Industry), and the Director General for Sustainable Farming, Food and Fisheries, Andy Lebrecht.

Resources for you

The Arthur Rank Centre runs workshops for clergy who are in charge of multi-parish benefices, a common rural situation. The next workshop is scheduled for the 5th and 6th June at Offa House in Warwickshire (close to the National Agricultural Centre at Stoneleigh). The cost is £85, including accommodation, and details are available from the Arthur Rank Centre, Telephone 024 7685 3060. Their website is also a useful resource for Rogation Sunday material, www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk.

I hope this is helpful,

Nick Read