

Diocese of Hereford, Chaplain for Agriculture & Rural Life

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Dear Colleague

August Briefing

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

Weather hits farming

Not unsurprisingly, the severe wet weather is having a dramatic impact on agriculture. The NFU has been running a commentary on the weather impacts, available on www.nfuonline.com and the churches have responded by re-opening the Addington Fund as a hardship fund for individual farmers who need financial help. This might include help towards feed costs for those who have had to house their animals, interim support for soft fruit farmers who have lost their crop etc. The helpline number is 07002 326 326. Further contact details of help and support in agriculture are available from the Farming Help Partnership, www.farminghelp.org.uk

New Ministerial Team at defra

Following the appointment of Gordon Brown as Prime Minister, defra has been given a new ministerial team. They are:

- Hilary Benn – Secretary of State and lead for the UK on sustainable development and climate change
- Lord Rooker – Minister of State (Lords), leading on food and farming and animal health and welfare (in the Lords)
- Phil Woolas – Minister of State, leading on climate change mitigation and energy, water, flooding and pesticides
- Joan Ruddock – Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, leading on the Climate Change Bill, waste and recycling, biodiversity, environmental regulation and domestic forestry
- Jonathan Shaw – Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (and Minister for the South East), leading on food and farming and animal health and welfare (in the Commons), Rural Affairs, national parks, land management, soils and landscape.

EU suspends set-aside

Set aside was a policy mechanism designed to curb over production by paying farmers to “set aside” land from production. However the poor weather in Europe, the drought in Australia, and increasing demand for biofuels mean that grain is likely to be in short supply and stocks during 2007/8 will fall to their lowest level for 28 years. Consequently the EU Commission has scrapped set aside for the 2007/8 cropping year. This may help EU farmers to produce an additional 10-17m tonnes of grain and oilseeds. Voluntary set aside will continue for those managing environmental schemes.

Annual Report on the “State of the Countryside”

The Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) has published its annual “State of the Countryside” report. It shows that almost 400,000 fewer young people live in rural England compared with 20 years ago, and the exodus is even more startling when set against a general rise in the rural population. This trend is considered to be a real threat to the diversity and sustainability of rural communities, and is putting strains on the viability of rural schools, the provision of youth services. Lack of affordable housing and low income jobs are considered to be two major contributory factors. Further information is available on the CRC website: www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

GM update

The first genetically modified product for almost ten years is likely to be approved for cultivation in Europe when the Commission licences a new potato used for starch production. The potato is produced by BASF of Germany and it has been engineered to produce high levels of starch for industrial uses, rather than food consumption. The 27 ministers from the members of the EU were split on the decision, but not enough to veto the proposal.

At a recent media briefing hosted by the Royal Institution, the creator of Dolly the Sheep (the first cloned sheep) suggested that cloned animals used for food production would soon become the norm. Professor Keith Campbell, director of animal bioscience at Nottingham University, said the USA expected to be eating burgers from cloned farm animals within two years. The first calf has been born from an imported cloned animal with the arrival of “Dundee Paradise” earlier this year.

Farming-related campaigns and resources

The year of food and farming (see earlier briefings) is gaining momentum. A website is being launched in September to make connections between farmers and schools. Schoolteachers who register will receive e-mail updates and have access to educational resources, the website address is www.yearoffoodandfarming.org.uk

The launch will take place during British Food Fortnight (22nd September to 7th October), now in its sixth year, which celebrates the diverse range of food from Great Britain. Details of activities around the country, and of recipes and advice on healthy eating, are available on www.britishfoodfortnight.co.uk, or phone 020 7840 9292.

A further initiative, Farmers’ Weekly “Kids Connect” campaign was launched at the Royal Show, aimed at helping children make connections with where their food comes from. It involves giving them the facts and figures and encouraging farmers to host moiré school visits, and get themselves invited into the classroom. The website is www.kidsconnectcampaign.co.uk.

I hope this is helpful,

Nick Read