

Dear Colleague

September Briefing 2009

A few notes which I hope might be helpful in your dealings with farmers.

Bovine TB and animal health update

The costs of dealing with Bovine TB are predicted to rise to over £1bn a year by 2015 according to the National Beef Association (NBA) if the numbers of cows affected continue to increase at current rates (c40% increase pa). The NBA are also calling for alpacas and llamas (camelids) to undergo TB testing, with over 1,000 registered alpaca owners in the UK (accounting for more than 20,000 animals). In the UK 453 people are believed to have contracted "bovine" TB between 1994 and 2007. The most recent case within the last month involves a government worker involved in testing badgers for bovine TB based at the Food and Environment Research Agency at Woodchester Park in Gloucester.

Predictably, the Welsh Assembly Government's consultation on its proposals to tackle bovine TB, including a cull of badgers, has drawn sharply divergent responses. Meanwhile the programme of testing herds, including camelids (see above), across Wales continues with 87 herds having positive reactors in areas in which testing would otherwise only be scheduled every four years.

A report by Newcastle University highlights the decline in the number of farm animal veterinary practices. Just 10% of practices in the UK had farming clients and a significant number (up to 27%) of these were considering concentrating on small animals or reducing their agricultural content further. The report makes a number of recommendations to revitalise the farm vet service: www.relu.ac.uk

Food issues

Defra has launched an online discussion document on the future of food and what the country's food system might look like in 2030. The report states that climate change, animal diseases and water shortages could impact upon food production across the globe. Whilst the UK needs to do more to tackle climate change on the one hand the UK Food Security Assessment, looking at food sustainability up to 2030, suggests that the country should produce as much as possible in order to meet demand. Details are available on the defra website: www.defra.gov.uk/foodrin/security/food2030.htm

Food price inflation is at the lowest level for eighteen months and the British Retail Consortium expects prices to remain steady for the next two years. Annual food inflation fell to 3.8% in July. However the benefits of low commodity prices have not been felt by consumers, defra figures show that farm-gate prices for a range of products including cereals, fruit and vegetables and meat and dairy had fallen by 7%.

Recession impacts on organics

Research conducted by IGD reveals that whilst expenditure on organic food remains static, 10% of organic shoppers have found cheaper, conventionally-produced food whilst a further 8% are focusing their organic spend on fewer products where they think it really makes a difference. However, nearly 20% of the population are still dedicated organic shoppers.

Stewardship renewal issues

The government's scheme to enable environmentally sensitive land management is running into problems. Agreements for Entry Level Stewardship (ELS), which pays farmers who manage their land in environmentally sensitive ways, will begin to expire over the next two years and a survey reveals that 23% of farmers are unlikely to renew them because of low payments and too much paperwork. Fewer than 40% of farmers were willing to take land out of production for environmental benefits now that compulsory "set-aside" has been abolished.

Supermarket Ombudsman

The Competition Commission has formally recommended, in a report to the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, that the government establish a supermarket ombudsman after retailers refused to sign up voluntarily to an arbitration scheme. The Commission has also published proposals for a Groceries Supply Code of Practice to ensure that unfair costs are not imposed on suppliers by supermarkets. A response is awaited from the government.

Dog-walkers safety

Following another death on a farm when an elderly dog owner was trampled by cows, the NFU has launched a series of signs advising dog owners what to do if near cattle. The yellow and black signs read, "Your dog can scare or harm farm animals – Keep it on a lead around livestock, but let go if chased by cattle." NFU members can obtain free signs by calling 0870 854 8548

Animal Welfare Sunday

Sunday 4th October has been designated as "Animal Welfare Sunday" and the RSPCA and Church of England are suggesting that churches use this to highlight the effects of climate change on biodiversity. The RSPCA has published a "Service for Animal Welfare", available on www.rspca.org.uk/animalwelfaresunday.

I hope this is helpful,

Nick