



Beef Sector Workshop Notes – Sedgemoor Market Tuesday 19th May 2009 18.00 – 21.00

Attendees:

Nick Bell, Phil Hadley, Richard Stanbury, Kevin Whiting, Dick Sibley, Gavin Iles, Rupert Dod, Elwyn Rees, Nick Cork.

Welcome & Introductions

Phil Hadley (Eblex & Member of SWHLI RAP)

Phil welcomed the delegates and thanked them for their time, explaining the reasons for this meeting – to set the priorities for the beef sector in relation to the SWHLI project. Delegates introduced themselves and gave a brief explanation of their interest in the project.

Project Overview

Richard Stanbury (Farmer & Chairman of SWHLI)

Richard gave a brief introduction to the SWHLI project and its background. The project has £12.17 million of RDPE funding over 5 years to deliver “an uplift in the profitability of the SW livestock sector”. As a farmer himself, Richard is keen to see that the money is used effectively to benefit farmers directly and is not swallowed up in administration.

This stage of the project is the consultation phase, as it was felt important that any initiatives arising from the funding were demand led.

This part of the preparatory work of the project is the 3rd strand of the market research element, as below:

1. On 11th March, there was a cross sectoral meeting at Westpoint, Exeter where delegates were asked to comment on and inform the broad outlines to the proposed programme
2. The 2nd stage was a commissioned questionnaire and consultation with vets and farmers, using telephone and paper based data gathering
3. This, the 3rd stage, involves the individual sectors (Dairy, Beef, Sheep, Pigs & Poultry) staging a series of consultation workshops to establish sector disease/animal health priorities.

Richard also explained where the money cannot be spent, due to EC funding constraints:

- There will be no rapid reaction fund for notifiable diseases, this being the remit of Defra and its agencies. This includes TB, although there are plans to use some of the money on a project that works with the disease
- It cannot be a capital grants scheme (there will be elements of funding available for capital grants, but only up to 10% of the total)
- Cannot fund lobbying activities
- Cannot be used to fund vaccination schemes or buy drugs

Essentially, projects will be heavily involved with training, spread around all sectors according to priorities proposed within these workshops (demand led). Public money will be used to address the market failures and it is envisioned that the benefits gained will continue beyond the life of the programme.

There were questions from delegates regarding how the project could address the issue of bTB in the region – and whether funds could be used to help with the management of the disease. Richard explained that SWHLI and the RDA recognised the huge impact that bTB has on livestock farming within the region and were currently looking at ways in which the funding could be utilised in projects that looked at working with the disease (which could be funded) rather than eradication (which would be ineligible under the scheme).

Identifying Top 3 Disease Priorities

Dr Nick Bell (Bristol Vet School)

Nick asked the delegates to list what they considered to be the top 3 animal health priorities for the beef sector within the SW region. He explained the format of the day, which would be split into 3 sessions: the first would be prioritisation of the issues; the second would involve break out groups looking more closely at each priority and attempting to address the objectives; the third would be a group discussion to collate all the ideas discussed at group level.

A list of possible priorities was displayed at the front, based on feedback from earlier sessions, but delegates were not restricted to choosing from this group.

The range of suggestions included: Pneumonia, Jöhne's, nutrition, Coccidiosis, BVD, IBR, Parasite control, fertility, performance & survival of young stock, growth rates of young stock, ventilation and the principles of building design & infectious disease status.

Other comments included: huge increase in the incidence of liver fluke within the past year or so (estimated 50-60% infection rate); pneumonia is linked to humidity as well as ventilation; abattoir information is currently being under utilised.

With reference to the feedback of abattoir slaughter data, Phil informed the group that the MHS is now taking the issue seriously at a high level and will possibly have electronic data capture systems in place by the end of the year for post mortem findings. Plants could then provide this information to producers.

The group reached the consensus that the priority was tackling pneumonia and the problem could be split between focussing on suckler and rearing systems, to address the issue in respect of the young stock of both.

It was then pointed out that it would be possible to address the issue of BVD and possibly eradicate the disease in the region, which would have a further beneficial effect on other diseases, such as pneumonia and scours.

By tackling BVD, the region would also improve the trading with other regions/areas – this is important as other regions are also tackling BVD, so to do nothing could put the SW in a poorer trading position long term.

Tackling BVD would have the greatest effect on other diseases/conditions. The group therefore agreed to look at both pneumonia and BVD as priorities.

Breakout Groups

All

The priorities were identified as BVD & Pneumonia

Group 1 – BVD

The group discussed a structured approach to tackle BVD in suckler beef herds. The project would work by blood testing animals to identify their disease status and provide a base measurement for monitoring purposes.

Animals that were disease free could be issued with a certificate identifying it as disease free – this gives an improved trading edge and in the US has led to a price differential, which in itself is motivation to tackle the issue.

The control and eradication process (quarantine and testing, coupled with vaccination and training) will systematically ensure that the SW could become BVD free over the life of the project. The SW could run the project through the private veterinary practices, who would also monitor the certification scheme.

Measurement will be possible through the number of certificates issued and the increasing numbers of herds certified as BVD free. Progressive farmers would lead the way and provide feedback to the aspirational farmers who will follow. It was not thought to be a good use of funding to attempt to chase the farmers who traditionally never engaged – they would hopefully see the benefit of joining the scheme as time progressed and more evidence was collected.

Group 2 – Pneumonia

It was noted that there is already a lot of pneumonia related education available – Pfizer have been conducting studies (cf the Paul Williams/Blade farming study).

By conducting lung scoring exercises in abattoirs and relating the results back to the farmers, explaining the cost to them and the potential economic return from seeking to improve the situation. After demonstrating the economic benefit, farmers would then have the opportunity to attend training and demonstration farms to talk directly with farmers who had made a difference and achieved the benefits.

90% of the problem could be attributed to environment and could be addressed through better housing. The problem can be traced back to how the calves were started in life: so calf selection would make up part of the training – how to get the best stock and then keep them healthy through improvements to the housing environment.

It was anticipated that this approach would provide some quick wins, giving a number of case study opportunities to share with other farmers. This group also considered it not worthwhile to attempt to target those groups that never engaged.

The key to the success and measurability of the project was in getting the base line information and showing farmers the potential cost savings of taking action – plus the direct and hidden costs of not doing anything.