



Sheep Workshop Notes – Sedgemoor Market Tuesday 26th May 2009 18.00 – 21.00

Attendees:

Nick Bell, Phil Hadley, Richard Stanbury, Peter Baber, Louise Moorhouse, Mervyn Davies, Bryan Griffiths, David Rossiter, David Disney, Edward Chudley, Jim Stephens, John Hoskin, Richard Webber, Peter Morris, Nick Cork

Welcome & Introductions

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.

- 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 about what the next steps would be once the priorities had been identified. Richard explained that the next step would be a meeting of the SWHLI Regional Advisory Panel (RAP), which would consider the feedback from all the sectors and come up with recommendations for the RDA to begin to release funds, based on the priorities identified within each sector.

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 sheep sector within the SW region. He explained the format of the evening, 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.

A further discussion identified the highest costs to the industry in monetary terms to be worms, lameness and abortion.

The range of suggestions included: foot rot, joint ill, mastitis, nutrition knowledge, genetic understanding, worms, handling, fluke, alternative crops for fattening/feeding, fly control, growth factors, lack of expert advice in region, recording/surveillance training, bluetongue, scab, anthelmintic resistance, fertility, bio-security, forage issues, stress, lamb survival, teeth problems, better management & planning.

There was then a lengthy discussion around the best way to approach dealing with disease. It was felt that the answers to many of the diseases were already known and the focus should be on getting the principles of good

management right, which would then take care of the disease aspects. The group felt that the cascade system works well and the project could look at addressing issues such as genetics, alternative cropping, health planning & management. If the progressive farmers in the top tier take action and lead the way, others will follow. There was seen to be little value in wasting funding chasing people who would not engage at an early stage.

Discussions split into 2 areas – the need to address genetics and seek ways to breed out problems; and the desire to concentrate on education of the farmer, especially around nutrition and the use of innovative forage crops.

All agreed that the money should be used where there was a market failure and that taking a group approach would yield best results. Groups could learn from within and with each other. Working with existing groups was viewed as a sound, practical option, rather than re-inventing the wheel and duplicating what was available. On farm meetings was identified as a key mechanism for getting farmer engagement with the process, as well as the use of positive language and avoiding the use of tainted terms, such as health plan.

There was concern that the funding may be used to obtain quick wins and it was felt that a long term, strategic approach would have a more lasting benefit for the sheep industry.

The group agreed to look at the priorities of: breeding, feeding and worms/fluke.

Breakout Groups

All

Group 1 – Breeding/genetics

The group struggled to get a mechanism for using genetics. Recommended the use of monitor farms containing groups with specific interests, who must be open to receiving visits and have had a programme of genetic manipulation over years to achieve health improvements.

More data would be required to measure the success of any programme – recorders could be sent to farms to capture data, looking at such issues as worm resistance and lameness to identify improvements.

Success would be measured by attendees at meetings and the growth of groups making use of monitor farms. This was seen as a long term issue, which would be difficult to prove a success within the 4 years remaining in the SWHLI project.

Group 2 – Nutrition/Feed Management

The main aims/objectives of this initiative were identified as: the ability to manage forage access, paddock systems rotation (addresses worms through pasture management), different needs at different times of year, utilising the farms own reserves, forage forecasting – looking at when the flush is coming, intake of dry matter per lamb, talking about grassland in an objective way.

Measurements would be: improved fertility (which could be measured by scanning results, number of lambs weaned etc); there would be less need for veterinary treatment; improved stocking rates; golden hoof – healthy sheep from healthy pastures; feeding would link into other farming enterprises.

It was seen as important that farmers maintained an open mind about change and learnt from other farmers. Knowledge transfer would be key, as would the use of exemplar farms. The financial improvements gained would be cascaded to other farms.

Could also use new knowledge to make better use of what is already available. The success of the Kiwis was highlighted, where their philosophy played an important part in their success.

Group 3 – Worms/Fluke

The main objective would be control rather than eradication. Abattoir feedback was viewed as important, but food chain information could be a risk as well as an opportunity – there would be the potential for financial penalties to be imposed on problem flocks etc.

Blood testing and faecal egg count kits could be used in conjunction with vet advice to engage in positive health planning.

Measures to be used would be performance parameters such as daily live weight gain, the incidence of flukey livers (abattoir feedback) and also financial performance over time.

CPD amongst vets was viewed as variable across the region, but there was plenty of enthusiasm from many vet practices to engage with projects of this nature.

Potential mechanisms for achieving these aims were: demonstration farms, monitor farms, farmer champions, focus groups, best practice, on farm meetings, farm visits and walks – a variety of approaches.

There was also an identified potential for cross-RDA collaboration over genetic research.

Phil mentioned the model in the US, where they appoint chairs for each sector. The chair would then coordinate from a University base to generate information on behalf of the sector. This was seen as a positive step, given a perceived lack of University based sheep experts in the SW.

The meeting ended with the group reaching some positive conclusions for future activity: work should concentrate on the more fundamental themes of feeding and breeding, rather than specific diseases such as lameness; there was a strong need for increased access to sheep specific expertise.