



## **Sheep Sector Workshop Notes – Trethorne Farm Tuesday 26th May 2009 13.30 – 16.00**

### **Attendees:**

Nick Bell, Phil Hadley, Richard Stanbury, Peter Baber, Brian Preece, Paul Williams, Mark Dallyn, David Turner, Tom Foot, Darren Reed, Robert Palmer, Edward Hosegood, Phillip Hutton, John Crook, Roger Heggadon, Mervin Hutching, Clare Parnell, 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 3<sup>rd</sup> strand of the market research element, as below:

1. On 11<sup>th</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> stage was a commissioned questionnaire and consultation with vets and farmers, using telephone and paper based data gathering
3. This, the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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.

Clarification was also given that around £3 million of the SWHLI budget had been ring-fenced for Cornwall.

### **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 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: housing education, lameness, more information on breeding (to help with abortion/fertility issues), coccidiosis, mastitis, abortion, record keeping systems improvement, good culling policies, better handling systems, fertility, nutrition, knowing the disease status of sheep bought, wastage between lambing and weaning, planning programme, recording process, worms, bluetongue, fluke, shortage of skilled labour, agricultural management advice, joint ill prevention, lack of abattoirs.

There was then a short discussion to attempt to prioritise 2/3 areas to address. It was felt that it would be a missed opportunity to only focus on one particular condition and that a whole farm approach should be taken, accounting for the overall management of sheep – health planning rather than a reactive, fire fighting approach.

Some had found undertaking a flock health plan very beneficial | tackling abortion and lameness, although it was noted that handling systems could be a limiting factor in any health plan.

Data recording on most farms was viewed as problematic and almost non-existent, but it was essential to have an active health plan – to discover where losses were actually occurring. Progressive farmers look at active health planning rather than using drugs as a fire fighting method.

The health plan needs to be a living document with the intention of making things better – collaborative groups can help with benchmarking. There is a need to capture and interpret more information to help achieve this.

Early diagnosis is vital in to ensure that health planning is preventative from the start.

It is important to establish baseline information to know where we are going and to be able to forecast outputs. Many farmers use each other for advice and guidance rather than vets, as there was a distinct lack of expert sheep vets in the region.

Some issues around benchmarking were identified as: difficult in practice (reluctance among farmers to cooperate); need involvement of vets; may need the carrot of capital grants to encourage some to engage with the project.

The group agreed to look at benchmarking in general within the context of 3 areas in particular: anthelmintic resistance, abortion/fertility issues & lameness – to see how each could be tackled with a benchmarking project.

## **Breakout Groups**

*All*

### **Group 1 – Anthelmintic resistance**

Funding should be made available for a testing/sampling regime. The next stage would involve the use of wormers to control the infestation, followed by re-testing. This would identify resistance to any of the wormers used.

This information would then be used to develop an action plan, including access to good, consistent advice from sheep vets/experts. This was seen as vital and could best be achieved through the use of farmers discussion groups – experts could then be invited from outside the region as well.

This approach would result in a more targeted use of wormers, coupled with greater farmer education. The group saw the scheme as starting off slowly in

year1, allowing the opportunity of ironing out any identified problems, providing benchmarking baselines.

In subsequent years, it would become more high profile, with greater publicity, the sharing of positive results and could be rolled out to the rest of the region.

The group identified several recognised sheep experts as: Leslie Stubbings, John Vipond & Neil Sargisson (members of the SCOPS group). They could be approached to cascade training to the local vet, who would then train farmers.

It was also recognised that this project could have major trading implications.

### **Group 2 – Abortion/Fertility**

This project would support the need for more farmers to keep better data, so that they are aware of what is going on in their farms. The group felt that any improvement would be better than the present situation.

The project would begin by collecting baseline data and benchmarking this data in groups with a vet present. The data would be anonymous, with the top performers asked to explain how they achieved their success. Hopefully, some of the poorer performers could also be encouraged to explain their own particular problems and how they dealt with them. In this way, a bank of shared knowledge would be built up.

Minimum records to keep were identified as:

- Condition scoring at tugging
- How many ewes were tugged
- Scanning %age, lambs tugged
- Lambs weaned

The process would get more complicated in years 2 & 3. Any diagnostics or complications would be addressed via the VLA. Improvements would be measured through the records that were kept. The reporting structure and data collection/analysis would need funding. Similarly, some funding would be required to facilitate veterinary involvement and specific SWHLI disease information bulletins.

There are potential issues with recording at the busiest times, but it was acknowledged that if some can do it, others can. It was more a matter of finding a simple system that could be adapted for each farm – so using example/demo farms would be a very good way of sharing best practice.

### **Group 3 – Lameness**

The group noted the lack of good agricultural advice in the UK and there was a brief discussion on the lack of specialists on sheep health. They suggested funding to help with the provision of a regional sheep specialist (based possibly at Bristol Vet School) to cascade training and lead discussion with farmers.

There was a need to build on existing work around lameness (such as that of Eblex) with follow up exercises designed to bring about change. Meetings should be held on farms, through benchmarking clubs.

There would have to be a strong vet involvement, with the emphasis on treating for what is there, not for the sake of it – which would involve correct diagnosis in the first place.

The project would demonstrate the value of addressing the issue to such an extent that it would foster a 'never go back' attitude – where the gains and benefits were so clear that farmers would endeavour to make the change permanent.

Recording would be straightforward, creating records of best practice and a history of success – leading to a consistent, positive message coming from the groups.

Knowledge Transfer would need to be clearly focussed and it would be better to use farmers as facilitators and champions to educate others. This scheme would work alongside other schemes, to add value and move what is currently available up to the next level.