

# **A proposal for a co-ordinated approach to tackling ruminant health and welfare across the UK**

## **Foreword: An appetite for change**

Discussions have been taking place across the cattle and sheep industry and with UK Governments over the last 12 months about how, together, we can accelerate the pace of progress on endemic disease – and broader health and welfare challenges – in ruminants. I have led these discussions alongside a small group of individuals drawn from across the livestock and veterinary sectors.

We have met with industry stakeholders, regulators and civil servants across the UK to share thoughts on a way forward, and to listen to views and consider models that deliver cost effective solutions.

The case for change is compelling. Despite a number of worthwhile initiatives, endemic diseases in ruminants continue to have a major impact on our industry's performance and profitability. Reducing the scale and impact of endemic diseases in a meaningful way would build our industry's resilience in the face of economic challenges such as Brexit. It would also go a significant way to improving our environmental impact.

Domestically, we face ongoing reputational challenges over health and welfare, and continuing high levels of disease which erode public trust as well as margins. In terms of export of meat and dairy, there has been a broad recognition that having a high national animal health and welfare status would enable the UK to access more markets - assuming there is demand that can pay the price.

The broad agreement from these discussions over the past 12 months is that given our rapidly changing political and social landscape, a simpler, more co-ordinated approach to ruminant health and welfare is now needed. Furthermore, a united industry voice would be valuable to government and could have better success in influencing spending priorities and championing innovation and best practice.

From our meetings, we picked up a clear and consistent appetite for change because of the challenges we now face. In particular, I would like to thank each of the farming unions across the UK for their wise counsel and support for this consultation.

While every effort has been made to contact every organisation that has an input or interest in cattle or sheep health and welfare, the industry is broad and fragmented, and it is possible that omissions may have been made. If anyone feels an organisation or individual with such an interest has been left out, please ensure they receive a copy of this consultation.

## **Gwyn Jones**

RUMA Alliance (Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture) chair  
AHDB Dairy chair

## Background

Endemic diseases in ruminants are of significant concern to farmers, the wider industry and consumers because of their impact on animal health, welfare and food production. This affects our farm productivity and potentially damages our efforts to mitigate against climate change.

Over many years, a number of sector and industry groups have been tasked with managing particular endemic disease challenges, and/or feeding in policy development and advice streams to the various UK administrations.

These groups include Action Johnes, Animal Health and Welfare Board for England, Animal and Plant Health Agency, Animal Disease Surveillance Governance Board, BVDFree England, Cattle Health and Welfare Group, Control of Worms Sustainably, Dairy Cattle Mobility Steering Group, Farm Animal Welfare Council, Mastitis Control Group, Sheep Health and Welfare Group, and Sustainable Control of Parasites in Sheep.

While the Cattle Health Certification Standards (CHeCS) have developed robust, annually-reviewed and updated industry-led standards for the eradication or minimisation of risk from infectious disease, uptake of these protocols is lacking in many programmes.

Although progress has been notable in some areas, the stark facts below show that we have a significant distance to go if we are to speed up the fight against endemic disease in ruminants (and ultimately aim for eradication or minimal risk/incidence status).

There are a multiplicity of reasons for slow progress including gaps in training and skills, fragmentation in knowledge exchange networks and the opportunity cost for farmers of tackling diseases. However, the industry has also undoubtedly been handicapped by the large number of farmers and fragmented administrative bodies, meaning a plethora of industry groups concentrating on a disparate number of areas rather than working in an aligned manner.

The cost to the cattle and sheep industries of endemic diseases is considerable – the financial implications for the top five most costly diseases in each sector are detailed below:

### Sheep

Disease	Cost to the UK industry per annum	References
Intestinal parasites (worms)	£84m	Niuewohf & Bishop 2005
Infections causing abortion	£32m	Bennett & Ijpelaar 2003
Lameness	£24m	Niuewohf & Bishop 2005
Liver Fluke	£13-£15m (figure is for England only)	EBLEX Stock Briefing 2011
Sheep Scab	£8.3m	Niuewohf & Bishop 2005

### Cattle

Disease	Cost to the UK industry per annum	References
Mastitis	£180m	Bennett & Ijpelaar 2003
Lameness	£54m	Bennett & Ijpelaar 2003
Respiratory disease	£50m	Potter 2010
BVD	£36.6m	Bennett & Ijpelaar 2003
Liver Fluke	£23m	Bennett & Ijpelaar 2003

## **Devolved vs. UK-wide approach on endemic disease**

Regulatory responsibility for animal health and welfare is fully devolved across the UK, and as such, there are different funding, policy and delivery frameworks. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have animal health frameworks which support delivery of cattle and sheep health priorities through stronger regulatory pressure. England lacks these centrally managed frameworks, relying more on different sector and issue groups promoting voluntary uptake of animal health management protocols.

The UK's devolved structures have facilitated responsive and targeted geographic action on endemic diseases, allowing each country to tailor programmes to suit its need. However, the UK acts as a single market in the trade of livestock, and animal health challenges in one part of the UK can have an impact in others. What is more, the UK's overall reputation in international trade will require a consistent approach to demonstrating our health and welfare standards and status.

## **Proposal for developing a more co-ordinated and effective model**

A new umbrella industry body called Ruminant Health and Welfare Group (RHWG) should be formed that would co-ordinate and focus industry drive on endemic diseases for UK cattle and sheep, and then work with industry and Governments to influence collective action and secure funding requirements. The proposed role and operation of the group is described in the following sections.

### **1. Objectives of the group**

The objectives of the group would be three-fold:

- a) Reduce or eliminate the impact of endemic diseases with the greatest impact on productivity, climate change and reputation.
- b) Identify and tackle the greatest animal welfare challenges in ruminant production to secure the UK's world-leading position on animal welfare.
- c) Agree UK principles of endemic disease eradication / control / categorisation and priority, where possible (recognising there could be regional differences in some instances).

These will be achieved by:

- Aligning all the key interested bodies to priorities for action;
- Developing and gaining commitment to disease control schemes (for example, the CHCS protocols) and welfare initiatives (for example, programmes on lameness), including Government action through regulation where needed;
- Establishing task-and-finish projects and securing funding to deliver the agreed outcomes;
- Securing broad engagement of the sector to maximise uptake and monitoring and evaluating outcomes to ensure progress.

While there is value (remembering that disease does not respect borders) in establishing UK principles on tackling endemic diseases in cattle and sheep, the RHWG's presence will be supportive and not duplicate or undermine work done by devolved frameworks. There is recognition that Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland already have protocols in place. The role of this group outside England would therefore be to assist existing bodies as they engage with relevant administrations to deliver these priorities.

Whilst it is hoped that principles can be agreed across the UK and that there can be agreement on disease priorities, this group would not have the means to set a UK strategy; it

can influence and persuade, but animal health and welfare is a fully devolved issue. The Group will seek to support and learn from the work and regulations operating in different administrations within the UK

In England specifically, the role of RHWG would be to co-ordinate industry action and provide a single voice into Defra with clear recommendations about the role it can play on priorities, including drafting legislation to support endemic disease control.

Non-notifiable disease surveillance and responses will be further improved and more easily facilitated through the sharing of health and welfare knowledge and industry intelligence across the UK's domestic borders.

## 2. Membership of the group

Given that endemic disease does not respect national borders, representatives would be sought from across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to sit on the RHWG. Membership is proposed to be:

- UK Farming Unions (FUW, NFU, NFU Cymru, NFUS, NIAPA, UFU)
- Species Sector Bodies (NBA, NSA, RABDF, Scottish Beef Association)
- Veterinary representatives (BVA, BCVA, SVS)
- National Office of Animal Health
- Livestock Auctioneers Association
- Animal Health Distributors Association
- Cattle Health Certification Standards (CHeCS)
- RSPCA (Farm Animal Department)
- Chairs of devolved animal health and welfare policy groups (Animal Health and Welfare Board for England, Animal Health and Welfare Northern Ireland, Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework Group and Healthy Livestock Scotland)
- Government Agencies (APHA Species Expert Groups)
- Levy Bodies (AHDB, HCC, LMC / AgriSearch, QMS)

No membership fees or subscription will be charged to members of the RHWG. It is important that all members have equal status in decision making and that smaller organisations are not put under financial pressure or feel unable to take a seat because they cannot afford membership.

## 3. Remit of the group

- a) Identify and agree endemic disease challenges/priorities.
- b) Ensure timely delivery and accountability of agreed activity.
- c) Facilitate the appropriate direction of funding and resource.
- d) Maintain and champion high health and welfare standards and priorities relating to domestic and international markets for UK production.
- e) Advocate for equivalent health and welfare standards of imported product and live animals to protect UK biosecurity and market interests.
- f) Support the UK's response to exotic and new emerging disease outbreaks by facilitating measures required to achieve timely and effective disease freedom.
- g) Deliver a co-ordinating role on industry communications to enable clarity of messaging to farmers and wider industry.

## 4. Funding of priorities

One of the first tasks that the RHWG would undertake should be to categorise and prioritise disease in conjunction with CVOs from each of the UK nations.

This exercise will start with understanding the current landscape on endemic diseases in cattle and sheep and completing a gap analysis on learnings and protocols for each of the main endemic diseases, both UK and internationally.

When a priority is identified, the RHWG, having no funds of its own to draw from, would have to provide persuasive justifications to various funding sources (which may be commercial, government, industry and levy boards or some other external source) to resource the work.

#### 5. Chair and officer team

Group member time will be supported by their 'home' organisations and meeting venues will be sought as 'in-kind' contributions from industry.

It is expected that the RHWG would have an independent chair and it will be up to the chair to select an officer team from within the group to share the workload and support him/her in a) developing a strategy for England/Defra; b) influencing organisations to align their focus behind agreed priorities; and c) influencing governments in the role that they can play on priorities.

#### 6. CVO involvement

The four CVOs will not be voting members of the RHWG because it is an industry group, but they will have an open invitation to attend RHWG meetings. A quarterly meeting will be held between the RHWG Chair (and possibly Officeholder Team) with the CVOs to share progress and exchange views.

### **The Consultation**

We are seeking views from industry stakeholders on this proposal for a more coordinated approach to tackling ruminant health and welfare across the UK and for the formation of a Ruminant Health and Welfare Group.

We would be grateful if you could answer the online consultation questions by **5pm on Friday 25 October**.