

A Summary to the Ruminant Health and Welfare Group (RHWG) Consultation

December 2019

1. Introduction

The consultation, on a proposal for a coordinated approach to tackling health and welfare in ruminants across the UK, was jointly facilitated by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, Quality Meat Scotland, Hybu Cig Cymru/Meat Promotion Wales and the Livestock & Meat Commission (Northern Ireland).

SAOS, as an organisation experienced within the livestock sector but without vested interest, have been commissioned to summarise responses to this consultation. This document is composed from formally submitted responses by the consultation deadline.

SAOS are a 'not for profit' organisation who specialise in development of cooperation and joint venture amongst farmers and within food and drink supply chains; providing information and specialist consultancy services that build stronger relationships and rural businesses.

2. Background

Talks across the cattle and sheep industry and with the UK Government and Devolved Governments have taken place on how to accelerate the pace of progress on endemic disease, and broader health and welfare challenges, in ruminants. It was subsequently proposed that a new umbrella industry body called the Ruminant Health and Welfare Group (RHWG) should be formed. The rationale being that despite several worthwhile initiatives, endemic diseases continue to have a major impact on UK ruminants. And that a more coordinated approach offers a way to meaningful improvement in profitability, industry resilience, reputation and environmental targets.

3. Make-up of respondents

- 3.1. There was a total of 60 respondents to the consultation including representative bodies, industry, producers, and academia. There were 51 submissions to the primary question of whether they agreed or disagreed, in principle, with the proposal. The balance of submissions included 2 incompletes and 7 invalids (no data submitted).
- 3.2. A breakdown of completed submissions (n.51) broadly comprised 49% representative bodies, 25% industry, 16% producers and 10% academia. Note that some responses provided were personal views and not necessarily reflecting their organisations position. Individual respondents may also be actively involved in more than one category, meaning category allocation is indicative only.

- 3.3. Three-quarters of those respondents agreed, in principle, with the proposal. Breakdown of responses by broad category is presented in the table below. Strength of agreement by category largely reflected the average, excepting Producers at 50% who ‘agree in principle’ albeit from a small sample.

Table 1: Respondents by Sector

Response (n.)	Representative bodies	Industry	Producers	Accademia
Agree, in principle	20	10	4	4
Disagree	5	3	4	1

4. Recurring themes

None of those who responded disagreed with the sentiment of improving health and welfare of ruminant livestock. There was complete recognition that ‘disease knows no boundaries’ and that discussions on how to accelerate improvement were commendable. There were, however, both common benefits and concerns raised across stakeholder categories, irrespective of whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposal. Respondent feedback was therefore assembled under two distinct parts – ‘recognised potential’ and ‘caveats or concerns’.

5. Recognised potential

- 5.1. There was broad consensus that a more strategic approach to formulate clear messaging was required. Most respondents felt there was scope for improved engagement with all stakeholders but particularly to deliver more effective Governmental representations.
- 5.2. Unity of voice and clarity of message were recognised strengths of this proposal – this new Group could provide the necessary overarching ambition (tone setting), honed from a coordinated industry voice, from which a framework for action can be delivered.
- 5.3. A recurring comment was the opportunity to avoid duplication and make better use of limited resources. This also links to previous comment on presenting a stronger, consistent, and collective voice that can cut through the ‘noise’ of having many smaller groups.
- 5.4. *‘The sum of the whole is greater than its parts’* – Cross-learning from the UK nations and the cattle and sheep sectors could add value and accelerate change; including shared intelligence and surveillance data.

6. Caveats or concerns

- 6.1. Greater clarity was sought on the proposed relationship with or impact on existing groups (e.g. CHAWG, SHAWG, COWS, SCOPS). This would help stakeholders better understand RHWG scope, interaction with existing work and relationships, the platform for rigorous discussion, and how it would make best use of specialists’ time – to ensure the effectiveness of the new group is realised.

- 6.2. It was questioned how this group could successfully influence the devolved matter of livestock health and welfare policy; there was also uncertainty on how RHWG would align or operationally contribute to the English animal health and welfare framework. And whether that was a good use of time for the other home-nation group members or the best use of RHWG resource intended for a unified UK voice?
- 6.3. There was concern the group could become unwieldy and problematic to balance representation by sector, region and essential expertise. Similar concerns were raised over formation of group priorities – noting the scale of the group, greater size of the cattle industry relative to sheep, different stages or policy on disease eradication across the UK, and even how to prioritise diseases.
- 6.4. Transparency and accountability through measurable impact and good communication beyond the group were considered important to ensure engagement.

7. Conclusion

The hypothesis was that speed of progress in matters dealing with ruminant health and welfare has been frustrated by a specialised but fractured approach that lacks clarity. Respondents to the consultation overwhelmingly agreed with the proposal and its objectives.

There was broad consensus on the opportunities it brings. Presenting a platform for industry stakeholders to hone clear industry messaging that avoids duplication and supports stakeholder engagement were common positive responses to the proposal. However, there were also common concerns shared (e.g. around role of the new group versus existing groups and the need for fair representation, particularly for the sheep sector) irrespective of their initial response, and the recommendation is that these merit deliberations.

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