

Progress Report from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Poultry Farming in the UK

I am writing with a six month update of progress on the implementation of the Government's response to the Committee's report on poultry farming in the United Kingdom. As you will recall the Government welcomed the Committee's findings and there was a high degree of convergence between the views expressed in the report and existing Government policy. In developing future policy in this sector, we will continue to take the Committee's views into account.

Rather than respond in respect of each individual recommendation, I will outline the action we have taken in relation to the Report's broad subject headings.

1. Poultrymeat Sector

The Government's response made clear the importance we attach to involving industry in the development of policy in relation to the forthcoming meat chicken welfare Directive (as well as the review of the laying hens Directive). The workshops referred to in our response have been under way for some time and are proving to be a useful conduit for industry views. In relation to the links between welfare codes and assurance standards, this is an ongoing process and we will keep this under review. However, as the Committee accepted, assurance standards are primarily a matter for the industry.

2. Egg Sector

We have already set out our policy that a decision on the future of enriched cages would not be made until the Agriculture Council next considers the welfare of laying hens Directive in 2005. We will shortly be embarking on a consultation process to inform those discussions and I would like to restate our intention to take relevant scientific research into account. We also fully understand the egg industry's need for clear legislative guidance to inform their future investment decisions.

3. Addressing Animal Welfare Concerns

In our response we made clear our policies in relation to research and development and that any decisions on proposed legislation will take this into account along with other available scientific, economic and veterinary evidence. We also confirmed our commitment to the Regulatory Impact Assessment process. Our position on these remains unchanged.

4. Tariff Protection

Within international trade rules, we remain committed to securing the best possible outcome for UK producers. But, realistically progress in some areas is likely to be very limited, particularly in respect of distinguishing between methods of production and processing.

5. Animal Welfare Payments

We are well aware of the issues raised by the Committee in this area and they will be taken into account in future policy decisions.

6. Import Quality

The Food Standards Agency has continued with a programme of actions to control the market for chicken with excessive added water and undeclared protein ingredients. In the UK, local authorities are monitoring the sector. As a result of the co-ordinated enforcement action in 2003, two prosecutions have resulted and 13 local authorities have issued warning letters. Further samples are being taken in 2004 as part of wider programme of local authority sampling. Contact with the Dutch authorities has continued, who are also undertaking a comprehensive inspection programme of companies supplying the UK market in February/March 2004. Agency policy has been to persuade the Commission to control levels of added water in poultry products and ban the use of non-poultry proteins. The Commission is considering issuing a 'Communication' on this matter, which will examine existing legislation controlling water holding ingredients in poultrymeat.

7. Supermarket Power

Since our response to the Committee, the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) have carried out a review of the operation of the supermarkets Code of Practice. The report of their review was published on 20 February. It concluded that there was widespread belief among suppliers that the Code was not working effectively but that there was no hard evidence to support this. The OFT therefore intend to carry out a focused compliance audit of the supermarkets' dealings with suppliers. The findings of the audit will be published later this year and will provide a basis for deciding on any further action. We welcome this decision.

8. Environmental Regulation

Development of the model application for approvals under the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control system has progressed and we expect this to appear on the Environment Agency (EA) website shortly. Although the progress chart envisaged in our original response has not yet been added to the EA website, Defra officials are monitoring the progress of applications closely.

9. Animal By-products Regulation

The proposed regulation on official feed and food controls will provide a framework regulation which essentially draws together existing controls on feed and food. Included in these are provisions for the control of third country imports and community controls in third countries to ensure equivalence with EU legislation. This proposal therefore addresses the concerns of the committee. It does not however introduce any new requirements in respect of animal by-products, rather, it aims to ensure a more comprehensive and consistent application of existing measures. The proposal is still being considered in Brussels.

10. An Uncertain Future?

I should like to reiterate here the Government's determination to continue with its existing policy of active engagement with stakeholders. In the introductory remarks to our response, we set out our priorities for the poultry sector and I should like to confirm that they remain our guiding principles. We will also do all we can to ensure that UK producers are not disadvantaged compared to their counterparts elsewhere in the EU. More widely, we will continue to work for the most favourable outcome for UK producers within the framework of our sustainability objectives.

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