From George Eustice MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Farming, Food and Marine Environment

Improved approach to surveillance for animal disease threats

Dear David,

I wanted to let you know that on 4th December 2013, Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA) announced an improved approach to scanning surveillance to better detect new and re-emerging animal disease threats in England and Wales. I am writing to you specifically as I appreciate that this issue will be of interest to your select committee.

The new system is being introduced to improve both the geographical and species coverage of disease surveillance across England and Wales by making better use of the expertise and resources of private vets, universities and the livestock industry. This follows recommendations of the independent Surveillance Advisory Group in 2012, to enhance the surveillance system as studies have indicated the limitations of the present.

Successful surveillance has always been based on partnership working, and this sense of shared responsibility is at the core of the new approach, with an emphasis on the development of expertise and sharing of intelligence among professionals working within the system. Given this I am keen to see the existing relationship between all involved expanded and developed.

Gathering and assessing surveillance intelligence will take on greater emphasis with reduced reliance on Government staff undertaking post mortem examinations (PMEs). Large numbers of PMEs are, for example, already carried out in the poultry sector and some private vets perform PMEs on-farm, within a veterinary practice or at intermediate plants (such as knacker yards). Better co-ordination and exploitation of these alternative sources of intelligence will enable a more comprehensive threat picture to be drawn than is presently the case.
As such AHVLA will be retaining a smaller, but still geographically well distributed, network of AHVLA post-mortem facilities and expert pathologists. The location of these facilities have been chosen due to their proximity to the main centres of populations of farmed animal species and these locations will, along with the species expert groups, act as centres of expertise for these species. The future AHVLA post mortem centres will be: Bury St Edmunds, Carmarthen, Penrith, Shrewsbury, Starcross, Thirsk, Winchester (until September 2015), supported by skills and facilities at AHVLA Lasswade for poultry surveillance. The Aberystwyth surveillance centre will also remain open until mid-2014, whilst the Welsh Government explores options to provide a diagnostic post-mortem examination service in the Aberystwyth area.

I appreciate that farmers and their vets are primarily interested in achieving a diagnosis that allows better management on the farm and better animal welfare. There will be continued provision of an AHVLA diagnostic support service to private vets and their farming clients. AHVLA will seek to concentrate veterinary resources on developing deep expertise in species-specific pathology, epidemiology and other veterinary disciplines which our consultations have shown are so highly-valued.

To counter this change of emphasis the network of non-AHVLA diagnostic pathology providers will be expanded. AHVLA will either run a tender exercise or establish a provider approval scheme for the provision of subsidised expert (second opinion) pathology services. Data gathered by these providers will be accessible to AHVLA through the surveillance network.

AHVLA will also ensure the availability of training for private vets, and work with the fallen stock industry to encourage an expansion of local first opinion gross pathology services. This will improve both timeliness of diagnostic information for farmers, improve surveillance coverage and enable vets in practice to provide their clients with a more comprehensive service.

A carcase collection service will be introduced for the initial three year period whilst the network fully trained private vets is established. This will collect carcases from within the areas where AHVLA post-mortem facilities have been closed and are not initially covered by other providers. As now, livestock keepers will be responsible for transporting carcases to the collection point, with AHVLA funding the onward journey to a post-mortem facility. This service will ensure that farmers and vets in these areas continue to have the same level of access to post mortem facilities as at present, and that surveillance information from these areas is not lost in the period whilst the provision of first opinion diagnostic post-mortem examinations by other providers increases.

The new system also brings a new approach to governance involving all those who benefit from the system: Defra, the Welsh Government, private veterinary practitioners, and representatives from the farmed livestock industry and other stakeholders. This will help ensure the system is fit-for-purpose, cost-effective, and informs disease and risk management to support us building a resilient farming industry for the future.
The new model will be implemented progressively during 2014, although no existing post-mortem centres are expected to close until after April 2014. Further details are published at: http://www.defra.gov.uk/ahvla-en/disease-control/surveillance/new-vet-surv-model/

George Eustice

GEORGE EUSTICE MP