Relu conference 16 November 2011: “Who Should Run the Countryside?”

**Workshop discussion 1: Who owns animal health:**

**the farmer or the state?**

12.00-13.00 hrs

The balance of costs and responsibilities between farmer and state regarding farm animal health and the security and safety of our food supplies has never been more hotly debated. This workshop offers a forum for open discussion on the issues.

**Panel:** **Laura Green**, Warwick University

**Joe Brownlie**, Royal Veterinary College

**Jeff Waage**, London International Development Centre

**Gwyn Jones**, National Farmers’ Union

Mark Holdstock

TB is the biggest animal health challenge today. Should the state accept the need for badger culling and should they pay for it?

Laura Green

Why are we asking this question?

Infectious diseases are complicated and what one farmer does impacts on another. A farmer who vaccinates is protecting others in the area, and sending an animal to slaughter that has been vaccinated is less risky in terms of spreading disease. One who does not vaccinate is potentially infecting others.

What one farmer does impacts on other farmers around them. Farmers cannot work in isolation, so where does farmer responsibility begin and end?

The way we control disease is either through vaccination or by controlling movements.

Some diseases highlight the differences in understanding of disease, for example TB: the perceived risk influences the testing regime, and this takes responsibility away from farmers.

Farmers draw on their own past experience, if they have had problems with disease in the past they may be more likely to use vaccines.

From our research interviewing farmers we have found 4 patterns of behaviour:

* One group have below average knowledge of disease, take a low level of responsibility and feel that getting disease is a matter of luck and therefore unpredictable
* The second group have low awareness of disease but are willing to bring the vet in when they realise they have a problem with disease
* The third group have good knowledge of disease and actively manage their animals’ health but still see contracting disease as inevitable
* The fourth group have high awareness and want to be proactive in tackling disease. They take full responsibility for animal health

People who haven’t had TB are either blissfully unaware of it or are dreading the day it arrives. Those who have had TB feel that they have lost control of their farm.

If we want to control animal disease, we need to act collectively. The lesson we have learned from bovine TB is that disease has to be owned by all parties if it is to be controlled, and farmers need the knowledge to be able to manage disease.

Joe Brownlie

Explained division of notifiable and endemic diseases; traditionally government has only managed notifiable diseases.

Any success in eradicating disease has been led by government. We have no history of doing this in the farming industry on a voluntary scale.

There are many benefits of controlling disease including food security, reducing greenhouse gases, showing support for the livestock industry.

BVD (bovine viral diarrhoea virus) has been eradicated in Scandinavia and other European countries have got national control programmes but there is nothing in England (starting work on this in Scotland).

We need co-operation in the livestock industry. There is no obvious industry leader for the agriculture industry. (In Sweden, 90% of farmers are members of the Swedish Dairy Association).

It is not a question of finance or of not having the right technology – the industry needs a cultural change, vision and leadership.

Jeff Waage

Comparing animal, plant and human health – the question of who owns disease is currently exercising all three communities.

The drive to find a balance between state and industry ownership comes from the growing realisation that a more flexible and cooperative approach to disease management will be more effective than a monolithic approach.

There are well organised sectors such as potato and sugar beet industries where they have few diseases and are able to make private insurance schemes work. However in the horticulture sector there are a wide range of diseases and a complex network of producers and distributors that makes disease control harder.

Technology has often stood in the way of taking a balanced approach to disease because historically technology has been in the hands of the state. Farmers are frustrated that they don’t know what is going on on their own farm. However there is now a trend for people to have their own technology (in human health for example in home diabetes kits) and there are new diagnostic tools for animal health.

The revolution in diagnostic technology will be a great leveller between state and industry.

Gwyn Jones

Farmers work in isolation and take their own decisions about their farms every day but regulation of animal health is decided by government and imposed on them.

Farmers shouldn’t tolerate disease spread by poor practice in the industry. Neither should the public tolerate risky practices such as illegal food imports.

Every act of government that favours voter preference over animal health shows their lack of ownership of the issue.

For exotic disease, the government applies legal controls to reduce the risk of disease entering the country and spreading if it does enter. The farmer protects their stock against whatever residual risk remains. Bluetongue is different because it is spread by the wind – the industry accepted corporate ownership that increased effectiveness of disease control at the farm level.

The Animal Health and Welfare Board should have been an opportunity for collaboration between industry and state by taking politics out of the equation, but it is a missed opportunity because the government has reserved the right to take final decisions.

Discussion

* The lack of an extension system in England and Wales leads to problems communicating information to farmers. It is very unusual for a developed country not to have an extension system.
* It is a fact that government has a limited pot of money to spend so the real issue is getting government and industry to agree on which diseases to prioritise.
* It is alarming to hear how detached some farmers are from the markets in which their products are sold i.e. not understanding the economics of their own farms. This is not true of other sectors e.g. apple growers know the cost of every apple they produce.

Laura Green – the issue is not about how to get the science on animal disease ‘out there’ but about solving the problems that farmers need solving. It’s about listening.

Gwyn Jones – the reason bluetongue vaccine wasn’t used by all farmers is because every farmer assesses the risk individually. Plus there are a lot of rumours e.g. that the vaccine causes infertility in sheep, and it takes a lot of work to counter those rumours

* Farmers can continue to farm perfectly well even if their animals are diseased. How do you communicate the benefits of eradicating disease to them?
* Joe Brownlie: Veterinary research has shown that eradicating diseases like BVD is cost effective, but the problem is educating farmers and as there are fewer large animal vets this is going to get more difficult.