BVA British Veterinary Association | Consultation response

BVA response to EFRA Committee Call for Evidence: Food Security

Who we are

1. The British Veterinary Association (BVA) is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom. With over 18,000 members, our primary aim is to represent, support and champion the interests of the United Kingdom's veterinary profession. We therefore take a keen interest in all issues affecting the profession, including animal health and welfare, public health, regulatory issues, and employment matters.

Introduction

2. Veterinary surgeons contribute to every aspect of animal production, and therefore the profession can contribute to mitigating losses and driving productivity.
3. With the above in mind, we welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee on the pressures facing the UK food supply chain and its implication for UK food security and public access to healthy and nutritious food.
4. Below, we set out how the veterinary profession contributes to food security through improvements to animal health, animal welfare and biosecurity, as well as highlighting the main areas we believe government must focus on to maintain and improve food security

Animal health and welfare

5. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, the importance of agriculture, and all those involved in the farm to fork process, was brought into sharp relief. This includes farm animal vets and Official Veterinarians in abattoirs who continued to provide essential services to ensure sufficient food for the UK at the height of lockdown restrictions.
6. As with other sectors, increased production costs, resulting from the pandemic and subsequent cost of living crisis, will have consequences for livestock sectors. There is a concern that economic uncertainty will see farmers postpone more future-minded services, such as herd health planning or vaccination, or delay investments in systems that would see an increase in health and welfare.
7. The contribution of improved animal health to food security is vast. According to the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH), over 20% of animal production losses are linked to animal diseases.[1]
8. The Scottish Government has been able to assess the economic benefits of controlling avoidable endemic disease:

"it is estimated that veterinary interventions have significant economic impact through avoidable costs to the industry and taxpayer. The avoided costs attributable to veterinary services in Scotland for 30 endemic diseases of farm animals were estimated to be between £100m and £154m per annum. The avoided costs due to veterinary control measures stopping exotic disease outbreaks (FMD, Bluetongue and AI) were estimated at £135m per annum. Likewise, avoided costs from controlling and minimising outbreaks of BSE, salmonella, campylobacter and E.coli O157 were estimated at £96m per annum." [2]

[1] Animal Health: A multi-faceted challenge, OIE August 2015
[2] https://www.gov.scot/publications/preliminary-economic-assessment-veterinary-professions-value-scotland/

9. Recently, Animal Health Ireland noted that their disease programmes were estimated to have saved Irish farmers and the agri-food industry at least €135m per year by reducing BVD and mastitis.[3]
10. To support a sustainable UK agriculture and aquaculture industry going forward, it is important that government continues to work with the sector to promote the UK's high animal health and welfare standards, support UK-based food production and encourage consumers to value UK produce.
11. Animal disease will form a considerable portion of the potential risks that any individual farm business, or the wider sector, is likely to face at both a local and national level. Improved health status, biosecurity and husbandry will also reduce disease risk, leading to a more financially resilient sector.
12. Furthermore, it is vital that the UK government honours its manifesto commitment to maintain and enhance animal welfare standards, ensuring that any future trade deals do not undermine the essential work of UK agriculture.

Border controls

13. The UK Government has announced an intention to reset the timetable for the introduction of controls on imports from the EU into Great Britain. We are seeking opportunities to engage with government on the development of a new border operating model which will to help protect against diseases that could severely affect UK food security.
14. Live animals and products of animal origin (POAOs) may carry pathogens that can represent a threat to public health and the health and welfare of animal populations. Border controls protect humans, animals, and plants from diseases, pests, or contaminants that can enter a territory through trade, tourism or other movements. They form a vital part of the UK's framework of biosecurity protections and consequently our food security.
15. Border controls serve the vital purpose of protecting national freedom from animal diseases (e.g., foot-and-mouth Disease and African Swine Fever). The consequences of failing to maintain freedom from disease can be costly. This was vividly illustrated by the foot-and-mouth outbreak in 2001, which is estimated to have cost £5 billion to the private sector and £3billion to the public sector, damaged the lives of farmers and rural communities, harmed the reputation of UK agriculture, and caused a general election to be postponed.[4] Having robust systems in place to ensure continued freedom from disease provides assurance to domestic consumers and trading partners.
16. Recently the advance of African Swine Fever (ASF), a fatal and highly infectious disease of pigs, has been concerning. ASF has moved west across Asia and has been detected as near to the UK as Belgium.[5] An assessment[6] of the economic losses caused by ASF outbreaks in China between August 2018 and July 2019 showed a total economic loss that accounted for 0.78% of China's gross domestic product in 2019, with impacts experienced in almost all economic sectors through links to the pork industry, and a substantial decrease in consumer surplus.

[3] https://www.irishexaminer.com/farming/arid-40799934.html
[4] National Audit Office, The 2001 Outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease, 2002
[5] Updated Outbreak Assessment #10 African swine fever in Europe (Eastern Europe & Belgium) 23 March 2020
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874897/asf-easteurope-update10.pdf
[6] Shibing et al (2021) African swine fever outbreaks in China led to gross domestic product and economic losses
Nature Food volume 2, pages802–808 (2021) https://www.nature.com/articles/s43016-021-00362-1

17. Import checks form a line of defence to help protect against diseases not currently present in the UK, such as African Swine Fever. It is therefore vital that we do not see a further delay in the introduction of these basic biosecurity and food safety measures. Going forward, there needs to be greater planning and engagement with the veterinary profession to ensure capacity is in place to meet the requirements.
18. Import controls play a vital role in protecting the UK from disease or food safety outbreak. But these controls also provide assurance that protect our trading arrangements with export markets. It is vital that our trading partners accept our system of import controls for the UK to continue to export.

Exports

19. The sustainability of domestic production is dependent on the ability to export to foreign markets. The UK still imports a significant amount of meat in spite of high self-sufficiency levels. This is dictated by cultural dietary preferences for certain cuts of meat over others and is reflected in the price that processors can achieve for each element of the carcass.
20. Products of lower value on the domestic market can enter international commodity markets, which adds value for domestic producers and processors. The value of fifth quarter products continue to improve and in some cases the value of offal can even exceed that of traditional premium cuts.
21. Greater international presence and veterinary expertise is required to highlight additional opportunities for fifth quarter products, combined with the UK's ability to effectively harvest and market a range of cuts and offal, would add further to the sustainability of domestic producers.

Veterinary workforce

22. The veterinary profession is diverse, with far-reaching influence and impact in all parts of the food system, including.
    - production animal clinical practice, which provides preventive healthcare and treatment for livestock, as well as carrying out disease surveillance, promoting good biosecurity, boosting productivity, driving sustainability and maintaining standards of animal welfare.
    - aquaculture, providing the UK sector with dedicated evidence-based veterinary services.
    - abattoirs and throughout the food chain, where veterinary certification is key to securing public health, food safety, animal welfare and assurance for consumers in domestic and foreign markets.
    - certification and supervision the import and export of animals and animal products. The vital role of veterinary surgeons in trade, protecting public health, food safety, animal health and animal welfare is recognised around the world.
    - veterinary schools and independent research laboratories, which advance our scientific understanding of veterinary medicine and animal production systems.
    - Research and industry, ensuring the UK remains competitive and forward thinking in many areas.
    - Government, where veterinary surgeons provide surveillance and the national response to outbreaks and deliver veterinary expertise to public policy making.
    - Training, education and capacity development of vets and others in the food system.
23. In the Migration Advisory Committee review of the Shortage Occupation List published in May 2019, a national shortage of vets was officially recognised. The profession was subsequently added to the list by the Home Office.

24. To ensure the continued resilience of the UK food chain and the agricultural economy, the capacity of the veterinary workforce must remain a priority for government.