

Companion Animal Feeding Working Group (CAFWG)

Meeting 5 – Sustainability

Thursday 1 February 2024, 11am- 3pm, via Teams

Attendees

- Sally Everitt (Chair)
- Liz Mullineaux (BVA Junior Vice President)
- Justine Shotton (BVA Past President)
- Andrew Prentis (Vet Sustain)
- Mike Jessop (VPHA)
- Agnieszka Dabrowska (FSA)
- Megan Knowles-Bacon (BVA Policy & Public Affairs Officer)
- Ali Ramsey (BVA Head of Policy & Public Affairs)
- Amelia Findon (BVA Director of Policy & Governance)

Guests

- Peter Alexander (University of Edinburgh)
- John Harvey (University of Edinburgh)
- Hillary Pearce (Hill's Pet Nutrition)

Apologies

- Dan Makin (Veterinary Surgeon and Practice Owner, Vets4Pets)
- Taranjit Dhansay (FSA)
- Georgia Woods-Lee (Weight Management Clinic Nurse at the University of Liverpool)
- Marge Chandler (BSAVA representative)
- Charlotte Pace (BVNA representative)
- Megan Cooper (EWAP representative)

1. Welcome and updates

S Everitt welcomed group members and guests. She noted that Vera Cottrell was moving on from BVA and Megan Knowles-Bacon had taken over the secretariat role for the group.

2. Presentation from Hillary Pearce

Hillary Pearce is the Associate Manager of Professional and Veterinary Affairs at Hill's Pet Nutrition. She presented on sustainability touchpoints for pet food. Key points included:

- The pet industry is one of very few not to shrink during recent recessions. In addition to food, the market includes clothing, toys and other products. Manufacturing and waste associated with all products has an environmental impact.
- Global pet food sales have more than doubled since 2010, likely due to an increase in pet ownership and / or greater education and awareness leading to more owners buying commercial pet food.
- There has been a growing interest in sustainability of pet food. Google searches showed a record high for "pet food and sustainability" in 2022. In 2020, the top 'ethical' claims made by manufacturers

included: organic, environmentally friendly, free range, plant based. Many claims are not regulated, and their true impacts are unknown, but are popular in marketing.

- The most common sustainability related questions from consumer focus on packaging recyclability. This is thought to be due to its visibility, as owners can see the impact in their waste.
- According to data shared at the American Feed industry Association's 2023 Pet Food Conference, the ingredients in pet food account for 57% of its environmental impacts. Other contributing factors are:
 - Transportation 19%
 - Packaging 12%
 - Production 9%
 - Other 3%

UK Pet food has recently produced similar numbers, highlighting the importance of ingredients when considering the sustainability of pet food.

- The type of meat and which part of the animal it came from can make a big difference to sustainability. The impacts vary depending on which metric is being considered, eg carbon footprint, water use, deforestation impacts. Some key points were:
 - Beef is the highest-impact ingredient for GHG emissions and total land use.
 - Muscle meat typically has the highest impact of different animal products. Pet food will often use organ meat and other products which are less appealing to humans, but are very nutritious.
 - Animal ingredients have higher environmental impacts overall than plant products.
 - Rice cultivation consumes more water than any other ingredient.
 - The source of the ingredient matters, eg soy from the UK compared with soy from amazon regions will have very different impacts on deforestation.
 - A drive towards more poultry could have animal welfare implications due to common methods of rearing worldwide.
- Results show that manufacturers cannot simply choose one ingredient over all others, and that many factors need to be balanced. The [UK Pet food sustainability handbook](#) contains helpful advice for manufacturers considering this.
- Recent pet food trends could be very unsustainable, as 'premium' brands use more meat with less grains and cereals. There is no evidence base behind the claims that these trends benefit animal health or welfare, and this is opposing the direction of travel needed for sustainability.

Improving sustainability

- Education – If pet owners feed the right amount of diet, they will cut waste in terms of products discard and extra being eaten, improving both animal welfare and sustainability. Feeding animals based on science, not trends, would substantially improve welfare and sustainability.
- The huge number of animals to be fed means they cannot all suddenly be switched to another diet, as there would be major supply issues. The higher welfare and more sustainable products may also be more expensive, which could lead to welfare concerns if some owners then struggled to feed their animals.
- A US study showed that animal owners, especially those with cats, said they were more likely to pay for more animal welfare friendly pet foods. The study also revealed a gap between understanding of how animals are grazed and how knowledgeable owners believed they were on the topic.
- Manufacturers must not simply chase trends - products must continue to be based on science and pet nutrition. Change is positive, but this must be done properly and takes time.

In discussion, it was noted:

- Numbers on packaging for ingredients can be confusing. Hills' website lists food in different ways, including % as fed and g/calorific to make this clearer.
- It was questioned how much manufacturers look into the production chains for source products.
 - It is not clear to what extent major companies are working on animal welfare. There haven't been any public statements, but there may be work behind the scenes. Smaller boutique brands are talking about it, but have smaller volumes and lower research outlays, so are better placed to focus on this.
- Recent trends have not been driven by the major pet food manufacturers. They are thought to come from:
 - Human health trends – a focus on fitness and paleo diets has crossed into pet sector.
 - Some influencers may be well intentioned, but not experts in this space.
 - Plausible messages – Feeding dogs in a way that appears similar to the wolves they descended from sounds plausible, but is not supported by more detailed evidence.
 - Major brands often get slammed by bloggers and boutique brands for their use of grains etc.
 - They hope the recent UK pet food report will help, as messages often land better when not from a specific brand. The UK vet profession could play a role in helping push back against these trends too.

3. Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved after minor amendments. It was noted that all actions had been completed and relevant details would be added to the themes document.

The group were reminded that BVA is changing its existing format for working group policy positions, to make them more accessible for readers. This group should aim to create:

- **A working group report** – to include main points from group discussions, including relevant research, evidence found, references and any conclusions reached.
- **Policy position** – a shorter document, around 4/5 pages, with small number of key recommendations (ideally less than 10). Recommendations must be achievable, with a plan in place for BVA to take them forward.

4. Presentation from Peter Alexander

Dr Peter Alexander is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Geosciences, Global Academy of Agriculture and Food Systems, University of Edinburgh, who has conducted research on [the global environmental paw print of pet food](#). Assisted by John Harvey, a PHD student from the university, his presentation covered the following points:

- We need to decarbonize the economy, and food systems (for humans and animals) account for approximately a third of all emissions. The volume of pet food sales is increasing, but emissions overall must be reduced.
- The environmental impacts are not limited to greenhouse gas emissions. The livestock sector's impacts in terms of emissions and land use are disproportionate to the energy (ie calories) produced.
- Animal by-products are an important component of pet foods. It is important to understand how to account for their emissions as part of the whole animal's lifelong impact. Three methods could be used:
 - Mass allocation – prime meat and by-products are all allocated their share of emission based on their mass.

- Economic allocation – assigns more emissions to the meat which has a higher economic value, giving by-products etc a lower emission factor per kg. All cuts have some value as they all contribute to the value of farming.
- Meat only allocation – only the prime cuts are assigned emission values, recognising that these largely drive the market.
- The economic model is commonly used as this appears to be a fair representation and would adapt to any changes in human diets affecting the value of some animal products. The most important requirement is to be consistent in approach used, to ensure emissions are not counted twice or missed.

Current estimates of impacts

- In an environmental life cycle analysis of a dog, pet food was the most significant contributor to its impacts.
- GHG emissions associated with dog food can be compared with those of driving an average car. There are various studies looking at the impact of pet food, with varying results. Results for dry food range from the equivalent of driving 1200 miles per dog per year, to over 10,000 miles/dog/year. P Alexander's study estimated between 2000 and 4000 miles per dog per year, increasing significantly if mass allocation was used instead of economic allocation. The results for wet food were significantly higher.

Reducing impacts

- Pet food impacts are made up of:
 - Mass of pets – reducing size and numbers of pets would reduce environmental impacts.
 - Pet food waste – reducing waste, including overfeeding, will reduce impacts
 - Food composition – the choice of ingredients, especially prime meats, can make a significant difference. The trend towards more premium cuts is concerning as we know this is a major impact driver, especially for GHG impacts.
- Possible ways of improving sustainability through 'established' protein sources
 - Lower impact meats – should these be used in human diets?
 - Plant based sources – more evidence needed on ability to meet nutritional needs?
 - Increased use of egg – this is already used in main diets
- 'Novel' proteins
 - Eg Insects, yeast, cultured meat, microbial/algae
 - More research needed to assess if they are truly sustainable. Some evidence they result in greater emissions than animal by-products
 - Any large scale changes will need to be carefully considered both for their impact on the environment and their ability to safely meet the nutritional needs of the pet.
- Action needed by sector:
 - Industry can improve labelling and openness about communicating ingredient data, and reduce prime meat in formulations
 - Veterinary professionals / organisations can create feeding guidelines which do not discourage sustainable options
 - Public awareness of issues and impact of decisions on sustainability needs to improve, and trends towards raw foods and prime meats reversed
 - Environmental research should focus on the impacts of individual foods based on composition, animal by-product impacts, and role sustainability influencers play in consumer decisions

Key messages:

- Meat content is a major driver of sustainability issues, especially in terms of GHG emissions
- Attribution of emissions to by-products is critical but complex
- Market trends towards raw, human-grade or humanised diets are highly likely to create higher environmental harms
- Environmental benefits of novel protein sources unclear

In discussion, it was noted:

- It was questioned why there is a significant difference in impact of wet and dry diets. The difference is thought to be due to composition of ingredients, but some results are due to differences in studies. More transparency of ingredients data is needed to carry out more detailed work in this area.
- With the food system contributing to a third of global GHGs, it was questioned what proportion of this is pet food.
 - The results are not clear but are estimated to be a few percent of the total. However, this still represents a very large number of GHG emissions.
 - The impact of the average dog is similar to that of the average car in the UK.
 - 70% of the food sector's emissions are due to food production (ie agriculture), the remainder travel, retail, marketing etc.
 - Some reports have suggested that 20% of meat produced goes into pet food. This figure is misleading. It may be correct if by-products are taken into account, but that is very complex to calculate.
 - The use of by-product is a key issue. It can be argued that pet food is more sustainable because it makes use of products considered less appealing for human consumption, eg tripe, but these products are nutritious and arguably should be used in human food more often. If these by-products suddenly stopped being used in animal food, it would change the entire food system. Assessing the impacts of this shift is very complex.
 - The economic allocation model accounts for human interest in by-products. If humans started eating more of these, their value would increase which would alter the allocation of emissions.
- It was discussed whether decreasing meat in a cat's diet increases their likelihood to catch wildlife.
 - Some [research](#) has been conducted on preventing cat hunting behaviour, which found that cats being fed a diet with higher meat content were less likely to kill wildlife. Other ways to reduce predation risk included playing with a cat in a way that mimics hunting behaviours.
- The impact of fresh/raw feeding on sustainability was discussed, with J Harvey sharing some early findings from his pilot study:
 - The study uses a linear equation to consider the possible compositions of pet foods and calculate the minimum and maximum GHG impacts. So far 35 foods have been tested, calculating impacts for the average 23kg dog.
 - Results showed that any diet other than dry food resulted in higher GHG emissions than any human diet, even a meat-heavy one. Fresh/raw feed had higher associated GHGs because of the prime meat content
 - There was a 47x difference between the lowest impact dry food and highest impact (wet) meat.
 - There was very little difference between vegetarian and non-vegetarian dry foods
 - Comparing the lowest impact dry food showed 8x less impact than the wet version of the same food.
 - Some of the difference in results may be due to a lack of clarity on pet food ingredient labels. Clarity on sub-ingredients used would help with impact assessments, eg "animal and meat derivatives" is allowed, but this could be from prime meat or by-products.

- It was noted that the statistics from the recent PAW report suggested a high number of animals being fed a raw diet, which is concerning in terms of GHG emissions.
- Labelling was discussed. It was noted that for human food, evidence suggests adding “environmental” to the label does not make a huge difference to consumer behaviour. Highlighting the appeal, eg “moist”, makes the greatest difference. Research would be needed to what impacts consumer choice for pet food products.

5. Sustainability discussion

The group discussed the topic of sustainability in relation to pet food, considering information from the speakers and wider sources. It was noted:

- Accessibility of information is an issue, and the details provided are not well understood by consumers. Pet owners seek advice from social media, breeders, pet shops, behaviourists and other sources. Labelling on pet food should be clearer and consistent with labels on food for human consumption.
- The huge difference in environmental impacts of each type of diet was striking, but care must be taken when discussing this due to the complexity of calculations. It is also important to consider that focussing only on environmental impacts would not take animal welfare into account.
- All major pet food companies should be considering animal welfare in relation to their product ingredients. BVA could take on responsibility for starting these conversations.
- The difference in rearing systems from across the world impact animal welfare and sustainability.
- The push to reduce GHGs may lead to an increase in poultry products over red meat, but this could inadvertently decrease animal welfare standards.
- From an environmental viewpoint, there is argument to reduce pet ownership. However, this does not take into account the many benefits pets can bring to humans. The policy position will need to balance these points and should include reference to the benefits of pet ownership.
- Tackling pet obesity is a long standing issue. It was noted that the sustainability angle may be a useful tool for getting these key message through to some animal owners. Nutrition clinics could include a sustainability angle too.
- The working group report will need to explain what animal by-products are, ie something humans could eat but choose not to. FSA may have useful resources or definitions to support this.

Action: A Dabrowska to ask FSA for any resources on ABPs

- Once the working group position and report has been developed, it may be beneficial to share them directly with pet food manufacturers, including those marketing premium brands. It may also be useful for BVA to engage with influencers interested in this topic to help prevent the spread of misinformation.
- It was noted that it has previously been difficult to encourage owners to switch to a dry diet even to save costs as there is a stigma attached. Acceptance is likely to be challenging. Realistically, owners are unlikely to stick to one diet as they perceive variety to be positive, and also want to feed treats.
 - It will be important to remind owners not to compare their pet’s diet with ours, and to stop following human trends. Animals have different nutritional needs which must be followed.
- If human diets change, this will impact the sustainability of current pet foods. We know that food system must adapt to meet climate targets, so it is likely that we will need to feed our pets differently in the future. Forward thinking is important.

6. Draft themes document

The themes document had been re-written with additional information added. It was noted that this will form the basis for the working group report. Group members were asked to comment on any additions or amendments needed. It was noted:

- On raw feeding, a lot of detail on bacterial cultures present in the food has been presented. It would be useful to look for data on animals or humans becoming ill as a result to ensure the impact of this is shown in a balanced way. It was noted that this would be challenging to find, and the impacts of antimicrobial resistant present bacteria even more challenging to assess. The group's report should be careful to acknowledge 'potential risks' and 'definitive risks' when discussing this issue.

Action: Secretariat to seek public health data on illness related to raw feeding

- The themes document often refers to production animals used in pet food, but this term does not include wild animal products which may be used, such as venison. "Food producing animals" was suggested as a more accurate term.
- Discussions so far have focused solely on cats and dogs, not all companion animals. Due to the variety in dietary requirements, it was agreed that the group does not have capacity to include all companion animals in the scope of their work. The group agreed the position title should reflect that it is focused on cats and dogs only.
- Pet food labelling is a recurring issue. It was suggested that manufacturers could be encouraged to provide a QR code on packaging with links to additional information, to keep the labels simple but with information accessible for those who need it.
- The structure of the themes document was discussed, noting that public health covers sustainability too. It was suggested that the report could consider these under the heading of One Health. The order and subdivision of topics will be fully considered as the final report takes shape, to make it as clear and accessible for readers as possible.
- Anecdotal evidence shows clear benefits for some animals on a raw diet, but it was clear there are many safety and sustainability risks associated with this. More research is clearly needed. A reporting system for any issues associated with food would be helpful to highlight problems with any diet.
- There has been a trend towards 'fresh food' with dry food seen as boring, unhealthy or over-processed. It will be important to clarify that there are no nutritional issues with dry food.
- Highlighting the difference between scientific and marketing claims for specific foods will be important.
- Feeding home scraps may need to be addressed in the position.

7. Future Meetings

It was agreed that the group would meet one more time to discuss communication with consumers, the themes document and the group's policy recommendations. Potential dates were discussed and would be circulated after the meeting. All group members were strongly encouraged to attend this final meeting.

Ahead of the final meeting, all group members were asked to write up their five key recommendations. These would be collated and discussed in the meeting, with the final shortlist used to build the policy position.

Action: All members to send top five recommendations to secretariat

Genever Morgan would be invited to support the discussion on communication since this was a major element of her research on raw feeding.