Speech given by Sheila Voas, Acting Chief Veterinary Officer Scotland, at the British Veterinary Association annual Scottish Dinner
19 June 2012, Scottish Parliament

Friends, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

Tonight I’m afraid you’re getting the stand-in act. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Environment, Richard Lochhead, was delighted to have again been invited to speak to you but sadly was unable to do so, so the honour falls to me.

But can I really respond on behalf of the guests? After all, I’m a member of the BVA. I first joined as a student more years ago than I care to remember. I’ve served on the Scottish Metropolitan Division Council and sat on Scottish Branch.

On the other hand it has been a few years since I last laid professional hands on an animal: and now when people ask what I do for a living, I often say I drive a computer, not least because it stops total strangers expecting you to remotely diagnose a skin condition in their child’s pet rabbit.

So here I am, happy to be responding for the guests.

This week of the year, with the BVA dinner and the magnificent Royal Highland Show, has come to feel like the agricultural new year in Scotland. Lambing and calving are done, harvest is yet to come. The sun should be shining, but this is Scotland, so we’ll put on our wellies and waterproofs – clean of course - on and take what we get.

Just like new year, this event has become an opportunity for us all to stop and ask; “what kind of year has it been? And what does the next year hold for us?” It’s also a time for a drink and a celebration, but before we get to that, let’s think about the year gone by.

Food exports

This year Scottish food exports topped a billion pounds, up 62% since 2007, meaning we’ve beaten our 10-year target by 6 years.

In that time meat and dairy exports have more than doubled, and a QMS report launched yesterday shows that in 2011 the red meat industry contributed £2.1bn to the Scottish Economy.

The Scottish Beef Calf Scheme has 10,000 more calves than last year. And a whole range of small producers of everything from chocolate to mussels to cheese achieved real international success.

Exports to critical Asian markets are up 40% in the last year alone.

Salmon exports are up 22% to nearly 100,000 tonnes and looking forward, a deal signed between the UK and China will see fifth quarter pig exports going there. With pig ears in China worth more than pork loin, this is a nice bit of business to generate money from a
product that has little value domestically. And who knows, in future we may have some baby pandas to export to China too.

In May we secured access for Scotch beef to the United Arab Emirates, which is a tremendous gateway to the middle east. A lot of the 8 million people who live there are expats, and with UAE being one of the fastest-growing tourist destinations this is a real shop-window for Scottish Produce.

And we are doing all of this against the backdrop of a global financial crisis that is now in its fifth year.

So why are so many countries opening their doors to Scottish food products? There’s a clue in the prices we’re getting on the international markets. European beef has a significant premium on global average beef prices. British beef has a significant premium on the EU average. And Scotch beef achieves another premium on top of that.

Reputation

When consumers around the world choose Scotch beef, the “Scotch” part of that is just as important as the beef. Why are they willing to pay more? Is it the flavour? Well, yes that is part of it but let’s be honest, how many people around the world can reliably tell the difference between a Scottish roast and an American one? Some can - many in this room can, but on its own it doesn’t fully explain the price difference.

When people buy Scotch beef they’re not just buying beef: they’re buying Scotland.

When a shopper in Bahrain or Barcelona or Beijing chooses Scottish beef, lamb, pork, or seafood, they are buying into the idea of Scotland as a land of fresh air, clean water and healthy, well-tended animals. We have a reputation and a track record that is truly unparalleled for quality and good provenance, something those of you who watched Gryff Rees Jones droving Highland cattle last week will realise is not new.

But this goes beyond the export orders of an individual business sector, important as that may be. This is about the image Scotland projects of itself onto the world stage. If you’re a business looking to expand into Europe, or a prospective holidaymaker thinking about where to go, you’re going to be attracted to a place that’s famous for the highest quality food and drink from a lush, fresh, green land.

We are doing well - but it is incumbent on everyone in this room who works for or with the Scottish livestock and fish sectors to protect and enhance our reputation.

And I’m delighted to say that this is an obligation that no-one is shirking – not QMS, not Scotland Food and Drink, not the industry sectors, and certainly not the vets. Many of the Scottish Government’s policy priorities have brought us into close contact with vets across Scotland over the past year, and we will continue to rely on you in the year to come.

Livestock vets are utterly dependent on the profitability of their clients for their income. That’s where our interests come together, because the Scottish Government has many objectives, but just one purpose – sustainable economic growth. Food production is one of the cornerstones of our economy and a major source of income. We want the same thing – a livestock industry that generates profits for itself, for you, for the rural economy. And absolutely critical to that success is world-leading levels of animal health and welfare.

TB
As a benefit of our OTF status we’ve moved to risk-based testing for bovine TB, which we can do thanks to the excellent evidence and analysis provided by David Logue and his team at Glasgow University. Of course, there are benefits to government in reduced costs, but also reduced costs to farmers through minimising handling and reducing false positives and inconclusive results. It also helps incentivise the safer sourcing of bought in animals.

**BVD**

We recognise though that this means less business for some vet practices, but are confident that the additional work from mandatory BVD testing should help to fill the gap. I cannot praise highly enough the engagement we have had from practitioners across Scotland in developing our unique BVD eradication scheme, and in getting their clients involved.

You are the essential link between us and the farming industry, and your contribution to designing the scheme is, has been and will continue to be critical. Put simply, if you tell us we’re wrong in any meaningful way, we’ll reconsider, starting with the assumption that you’re right.

Right now, vets are working with their clients on mandatory testing, but difficult choices remain to be made on what we do next. Our current consultation runs until mid-August, and while I know we’ll get a considered and committed response from the BVA I would strongly urge all individual vets, and farmers, to give us their own views. This isn’t the Scottish Government’s scheme, it’s Scotland’s scheme, and it will take a true partnership of vets, industry, science and government to make it work.

**Surveillance/ Schmallenberg**

So, we can reap the benefits of diseases we’ve kept out, and we’re working together to eradicate at least one of endemic diseases.

But we live in the shadow of diseases to which our livestock are naïve, and which can emerge from almost nowhere. In the past year a little-known town in Westphalia has become synonymous with a disturbing virus that reached our shores. I don’t think any of us in this room needed any reminders about the importance of an effective system to detect new and emerging diseases, but if anyone did, Schmallenberg was that reminder.

So I thank John Kinnaird and his panel for their review of veterinary surveillance, which was published last autumn.

On receiving John’s report our Cabinet Secretary immediately accepted the first recommendation, that we establish a strategic management board to oversee veterinary surveillance and the reform of it. I am delighted that this board, which I chair, is served by your own Freda Scott-Park, as well as Glasgow University vet Dominic Mellor, and this year’s NFUS Miskelly Award winning farmer Colin Manson.

John’s report doesn’t answer all our questions – but then if there were easy solutions to the problems, we’d have implemented them by now. What his report does provide is a route-map to the hard decisions, and we’ll continue to work closely with you to shape the future.

**BNP**

Carl, you mentioned bleeding calf syndrome. This is of course a serious threat, but I also see it as an example of success. New conditions such as this happen – what matters is what we do about them. In the UK, SAC was first to identify and describe BNP, and, working closely with the Moredun Institute, and others including the Dick Vet and AHVLA, a link was made to
Pressure vaccine. The excellent and close relationship both SAC and Moredun have with vets and farmers led to very high reporting levels in Scotland. What the emergence of BNP shows me is that, when the storms come, Scotland has the science, the relationships and the resilience to cope.

**HIVSS**

A critical part of that are the eyes and ears on the ground, and in that we are well served by our vets and this is particularly important in the more remote parts of Scotland, where it’s harder for farmers to send carcasses for investigation.

Carl mentioned the Highlands and Islands Veterinary Services Scheme, which is a demonstration of our commitment to the crofting way of life by supporting vets to get them on farms. As well as that we fund SAC to provide a substantial discount on testing for crofters. We must never forget that a cow on a croft in Easter Ross is just as susceptible to a new or emerging condition as a prize-winning bull in East Lothian.

**Welfare**

And we must go further than health, and look to the welfare of our animals.

There is sometimes criticism from those opposed to livestock farming about the welfare conditions of farm animals.

But the fact of the matter is that many welfare investigations and prosecutions are of companion animal owners, not farmers.

There will always be a tiny number of keepers who do not care properly for their animals, and the Scottish Government has created the legislation to deal with this. We work with AHVLA, local authorities, the SSPCA and procurators fiscal to rectify the problem. But livestock keepers in Scotland are overwhelmingly passionate in caring for their animals, and you, as vets know that better than anyone.

We’ve come a long way on welfare since passing the Animal Health and Welfare Act in 2006, but I agree there is a long way to go yet.

We are currently consulting informally with stakeholders on possible registration or licensing options for equine establishments, with a view to establishing a cross-sectoral consensus to inform any further action.

We have commissioned research into tail injuries in working dogs, and I am reassured by the presence of Bill Reilly on the steering group.

We will be consulting soon on wild animals in circuses, but first we must have a clear legal opinion on whether we have the necessary powers to completely ban this. There is little point in seeking your opinions and then not be able to respond.

We will also soon be consulting on welfare at slaughter, including slaughter without pre-stunning.

I know some of you may be looking for more action and less consultation and research, but we in the Scottish Government believe in government by partnership, and believing in partnership means taking the time to talk, to listen and to learn. There’s a lot going on, but it takes time to properly bring it all to fruition. We’re doing what we can, but it doesn’t hurt to be nudged on by the BVA.
**Research (EPIC, AWIN, McKelvey, Drug resistance)**

Underpinning everything we do in animal health and welfare is a world-class science base, which Carl so rightly praised.

This year SAC lost a committed leader in Bill McKelvey, and on behalf of the Scottish Government I thank him for his service. But Bob Webb takes over an organisation in good health, and we look forward to working with him.

Science has a bridge-head into policy development through the EPIC Centre of Expertise, which allows the Scottish Government the benefit of the very best multi-disciplinary evidence and analysis in animal disease outbreaks. EPIC will give us added confidence to know that we are making the right choices, for the right reasons.

Carl discussed the difficult issue of anti-microbial resistance and the challenge to vets in practice. Here in Scotland I am delighted that the NFUS and Moredun have jointly organised a two-day conference on drug resistance, focusing on scientific developments, new approaches at farm level, and how biosecurity, vaccine and breeding might be used to reduce the need for antimicrobials in livestock production.

This is just one of many examples of how our fantastic science institutions put themselves directly at the service of the industry. It is impossible to quantify just how much better are our decisions and our farming practices as a result of pioneering science bodies bringing the most recent thinking from around the world together with their own work, and turning it into something of direct use to vets, farmers and government.

**Conclusion**

At the start of my speech I posed two questions; what kind of year has it been, and where do we want to be this time next year.

It’s hard for me to conclude that it’s been anything other than a great year, but I believe this is only the start. There’s a world out there with a growing appetite for Scottish produce, and Scottish producers need local, expert vets who understand their businesses.

My predecessor Simon Hall said that the great thing about Scotland is that here they knife you in the front. Our relationships are strong enough, and our common ground so broad, that we can honestly and fairly challenge each other face-to-face.

These annual dinners are part of that – in these speeches, and in the discussions at each table, we’re moving forward a dialogue that has got us to where we are today. Long may that continue.

So, fellow guests, can I ask you please to charge your glasses, raise a dram, or a glass of whatever is your favourite tipple - at not less than 50 pence per unit, and join me in a toast to...

Our friends and hosts, the British Veterinary Association.