

BVA Position on UK sustainable animal agriculture – Executive summary

Executive summary

As the world population continues to grow and the number of people that can afford to eat meat increases¹, global consumption of animal-derived food is expected to double by 2050.² With increasing recognition that animal agriculture can be a significant contributor to environmental degradation, climate change, habitat loss and waste, changes in animal production and farming practices are necessary to increase efficiency of agriculture and mitigate environmental impact.

Ensuring the health and welfare of sentient animals is important as a marker of social progress, as well as for the role it plays in achieving other sustainability objectives. Some have noted that achieving good animal welfare is not always advanced as a policy objective in the sustainable development agenda, despite a growing moral imperative to do so and the utility value of healthy and happy animals in helping to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.³

With this in mind, the veterinary profession has a key role to play in advancing the roles and status of animals within this debate and ensuring that the highest standards of health and welfare for production animals are maintained and recognised as a key sustainability objective.

As part of the overarching [Vet Futures ambition to be clear and assertive about veterinary professionals' role in wider society](#)⁴ in its Animal Welfare Strategy '[Vets speaking up for animal welfare](#)', BVA committed to developing a policy position on sustainable animal agriculture and outlining the contribution that the veterinary profession can make to the sustainability agenda in the UK.

The veterinary profession is an integral part of the agricultural and food sector, working collaboratively with others to protect animals, people and the environment they share. Veterinary surgeons provide preventive healthcare and treatment for livestock, as well as carry out health monitoring and disease surveillance, promote good biosecurity, promote high animal health and welfare, undertake research and development, and optimise food productivity and sustainability.⁵ Further, veterinary surgeons uphold necessary legislation and international standards pertaining to animal welfare, food safety,

¹ Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), 2011. *Mapping supply and demand for animal-source foods to 2030* Available at: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2425e/i2425e00.pdf>

² Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). *Meat and Meat Products*. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/themes/en/meat/home.html>

³ United Nations, 2015. Sustainable Development Goals. Available at: <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

⁴ Vet Futures Ambition 2:

Veterinary professionals' role in wider society: That the veterinary professions are clear and assertive about their wider roles in society, including in public health and environmental sustainability, and the critical importance of our scientific expertise is recognised and valued both within our professions and by the public

⁵ British Veterinary Association, [Position on veterinary scanning surveillance \(animal health and disease monitoring\)](#), 2018

accurate certification and traceability. By carrying out surveillance and enforcement from farm to-fork, Official Veterinarians (OVs) certify the trade in animals and animal products thus contributing to economic prosperity, the protection of public health (including from zoonotic disease incursion and antimicrobial resistance) and the sustainability of food production.

Therefore, as animal health and welfare specialists and advocates from farm to fork, the veterinary profession is well-placed to advise and influence sustainable animal husbandry practices at whole system levels; safeguarding animal health and welfare whilst at the same time facilitating production efficiency and environmental protection. ⁶

Sustainability and animal health and welfare

Sustainable animal agriculture can be defined as animal agriculture⁷ carried out in a way that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability to meet the needs of the future. Sustainable animal agriculture should be undertaken in a way that is environmentally, ethically and economically acceptable for consumers, producers and wider society. As part of this, animal health and welfare should not be unnecessarily compromised to address human need and in order to be considered sustainable, agricultural systems must work towards the positive health and welfare of all farmed animals raised within them.

As a health-centred profession and key stakeholder in the One Health agenda, the veterinary profession also recognises that policies relating to sustainable animal agriculture must address the use of natural resources, protection and conservation of wild species, habitats and biodiversity in order to better protect the environment which both humans and animals share and reduce the ecological footprint of animal agriculture as a whole.

BVA recommendations

Our specific recommendations to enable the veterinary profession and other key stakeholders to contribute to the sustainable animal agriculture agenda centre on eight areas:

- Animal health and welfare as a key sustainability objective
- Sustainable resource management to protect and conserve species, habitats and biodiversity
- The role of the veterinary profession from farm to fork
- Welfare outcome assessment, including at slaughter
- Emerging trends: breeding, technology and innovation
- Innovative whole farm management systems to deliver both environmental and animal health and welfare public goods
- Alternative sources of protein
- Consumers and sustainable consumption of animal-derived products

Our specific recommendations are:

Animal health and welfare as a key sustainability objective

⁶ Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), 2011. *Mapping supply and demand for animal-source foods to 2030* Available at: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2425e/i2425e00.pdf>

⁷Where animal agriculture includes aquaculture and gamebirds

Recommendation 1: Animal welfare should not be unnecessarily compromised to address human need, in order to be considered sustainable agricultural systems must work towards the positive health and welfare of all farmed animals raised within them. BVA supports the [Farm Animal Welfare Committee \(FAWC\)'s principles for sustainable agriculture and animal welfare](#).

Recommendation 2: To be considered sustainable, agricultural systems must provide for the five animal welfare needs, positive health outcomes and adhere to [OIE standards for animal health and welfare](#), offering stimulating living environments to allow for the performance of highly motivated behaviours; opportunities for positive welfare outcomes, such as comfort, pleasure, interest and confidence; and excellent health outcomes.

Sustainable resource management to protect and conserve species, habitats and biodiversity

Recommendation 3: Policies relating to sustainable animal agriculture must address the use of natural resources, protection and conservation of species, habitats and biodiversity in order to better protect the environment which both humans, domestic and wild animals share and reduce the ecological footprint of animal agriculture as a whole.

The role of the veterinary profession from farm to fork

Recommendation 4: All veterinary surgeons should be able to articulate the contributions that the profession can make to the sustainable agriculture agenda; at the levels of individuals (communicating directly to animal keepers and owners), communities (eg. veterinary practices serving as credible and informed animal welfare hubs) and nationally (eg. veterinary associations developing and advocating policy).

Welfare outcome assessment, including at slaughter

Recommendation 5: BVA would welcome the further development of animal welfare metrics across species and sectors where they do not currently exist so that indicators of positive welfare, emotional and behavioural states are incorporated into welfare outcomes assessment and lifetime welfare assessment where possible.

Recommendation 6: To avoid oversimplification when considering how different production systems address animal health and welfare needs, animal health and welfare outcome assessments should form part of production system key performance indicators.

Recommendation 7: The Government should use public money to incentivise and support animal health and welfare outcomes as public goods.

Emerging trends: breeding, technology and innovation

Recommendation 8: Further consideration should be given to how breeding and genetic modification can be used in an ethically responsible way to improve animal health and welfare within sustainable agriculture.

Recommendation 9: Whilst BVA recognises the role of new technologies and innovative methods in monitoring animal health and welfare outcomes, addressing animal health and welfare conditions and optimising the contribution of each animal to agriculture systems, automatic systems should not replace the regular physical assessment of welfare and behavioural needs and appropriate human interventions by skilled veterinary professionals and keepers.

Recommendation 10: New technologies and innovative whole farm management models used to improve the contribution of animals, be that in terms of the production of food, animal feed or environmental goods, must not compromise the welfare needs of the animals in question.

Alternative sources of protein

Recommendation 11: To progress towards being a key stakeholder in the production of insects as a food source, the veterinary profession should develop further understanding and specific expertise in relation to insect rearing health and welfare issues, husbandry systems and assuring food safety for human consumption.

Consumers and sustainable consumption of animal-derived products

Recommendation 12: Within the context of One Health, the veterinary profession should promote the benefits of sustainable consumption and the concept of “less and better”, which sees some citizens reduce consumption of animal derived products, whilst maintaining proportional spend on high animal health and welfare products.

Recommendation 13: The veterinary profession should promote the benefits of properly valuing quality animal-derived products, where quality encompasses good animal health and welfare, food safety, environmental protection and fair returns for producers.