**Sustainable Aquaculture Working Group: Meeting 1**

Monday 24 January 2022, 11am, on Zoom

**Attendees**
- Chair: Simon Doherty
- BVA Officer: Justine Shotton
- Policy Committee: Ally Anderson
- EWAP: Andrew Prentis
- FVS: Matthijs Metselaar
- BVZS: Romain Pizzi
- Scottish branch: Ronnie Soutar
- Vet Sustain: Ruth Clements
- Research: Jimmy Turnbull
- RSPCA: Sean Black
- BVA staff: Amelia Findon – Head of Policy and Governance (part)
  Megan Knowles-Bacon – Policy Officer (Secretariat)

1. **Welcome, introductions and apologies for absence**
   S Doherty welcomed members to their first meeting. The group has been made up of members from a wide range of backgrounds, including those with expertise working with fish, sustainability and food production.

   Members of SAWG introduced themselves to ensure members were aware of which organisations and sectors they were members of, and the relevant experiences and networks in the room.

2. **Scope and objectives**
   The Chair noted the working group had been set up to develop the BVA position on sustainable aquaculture in the UK.

   The position should be balanced and evidenced based, recognising there are polarized views. It should constructively challenge existing practises where necessary as well as highlighting any benefits and the role of vets. The position can be used to challenge industry, break down misconceptions, and educate the public and veterinary profession about modern fish farming.

**Background**

The Chair highlighted that BVA had already undertaken a lot of work which would be relevant to this position. The group discussed the key points from these positions and noted:

- **Sustainable animal agriculture**: It was broadly agreed that the themes and recommendations of the BVA UK sustainable animal agriculture position provided a useful starting point for SAWG discussions.

- **Vet-led team**: A key principle of this position is the hub-and-spoke model, which sees vets acting as the hub for treatment, directing to the most appropriate allied-professionals. This model is unlikely to
suit the aquaculture industry, as historical reasons including fish not being included in the Veterinary Surgeons’ Act, have led to vets not being as closely involved or having the necessary experience for this model to work. A vet inclusive team may be better terminology for this sector.

- **Medicines and Parasiticides**: BVA has completed several key pieces of work related to responsible use of medicines.
  - It was noted that recent articles in the Vet Record had been very critical of medicine use in aquaculture. Fish vets need to do more to communicate with others to avoid misrepresentation. The sustainable aquaculture position may help to share some of that necessary information.
  - There is growing concern about use of parasiticides in the small animal sector. This impacts on aquaculture as it leads to preconceptions about the use of these drugs for treating sea lice.
  - The group should consider the point at which whole system change should be encouraged, rather than looking for solutions to individual issues.
  - Medicines regulation is different in aquaculture compared with other sectors. This affects how they are used, sometimes with unintended consequences, eg in Norway, lower thresholds have led to lower efficacy.
  - SEPA are currently developing a policy for the control of sea lice. They have been moving towards regulating use instead of discharge as that is easier to regulate, but for fish farms it is more important to monitor discharge.
  - Medicines regulation needs to be made smarter to enable more products to be readily available. The main drivers for regulation include a very strong wild fish lobby. The veterinary profession could potentially be a helpful voice in the regulatory bodies, but currently has very little influence on regulation.
  - It is important to recognise the different role of the vet in aquaculture and what they can influence. Vets will often get a request for a prescription for a specific medicine, rather than for a diagnosis.

- **Animal welfare**: BVA’s position on animal welfare states that “To have a ‘good life’, and at least a ‘life worth living’, animals must have the opportunity to have positive experiences. Over time, positive experiences should outweigh negative experiences. This should encompass the whole of an animal’s life. Animal health and welfare should not be unnecessarily compromised to address human want or need.”
  - There should be an equal focus on health and behaviour, focusing on positive aspects as well as the absence of disease.
  - There is a lot of research being undertaken to determine what a life worth living looks like for a fish, but so far there is little evidence of which factors have a positive or negative impact. This will make it difficult to produce an evidence-based position, so the group is likely to need to recommend further research.
  - It would be wise to look abroad for positive welfare practices which could be adopted by the UK.
  - When discussing animal welfare assessment, the group will need to consider the vast differences between species. There is a lot of literature available on welfare assessment, eg FishWel.
  - The RSPCA welfare standards are generally considered to be the gold standard, which have been copied by organisations around the world. In the UK, nearly all salmon and a majority of trout are covered by these standards, driven largely by demand from retail and consumers.
  - The RSPCA standards had previously focused on limiting poor welfare, but the next set will be focusing more on positive aspects and a life worth living. Other important initiatives looking at positive welfare include Waitrose and AquaScot.
  - It will be important to look at research relevant to farmed fish, as generations of breeding mean they are likely to now be significantly different from wild fish.

- **Sentience**: BVA strongly supported the introduction of legislation to recognise animal sentience, and also supports extending this to cephalopods, decapods and pre-natal animal forms.
  - It was noted that those working in aquaculture generally accept that fish are sentient beings, but the angling lobby doubt whether fish feel pain. The SAWG position should make it clear that fish do feel pain and are sentient beings.
Scoping
Attendees were asked to identify anything missing from the remit and scope of the working group, any additional sources of evidence to be considered and any additional stakeholders who should be listed as potential consultees.

In discussion it was noted:

- The position will focus on finfish. Cephalopods and decapods could be considered at a later date, but the working group will not have capacity to consider these at the same time. Other species farmed across the UK should be referenced in the introduction to help frame the document.
- A discussion on life stages will be useful, as there are different regulations at each stage. It would be desirable to align with ASPA when considering this.
- The position will focus on UK aquaculture but look to other countries for ideas and best practice.
- The group should remember that fish are not currently included in the Veterinary Surgeons Act, and expertise in fish is not usually promoted through veterinary schools, which impacts on the role vets play in aquaculture.
- Cleaner fish (Wrasse and Lumpfish) should be included, as both are farmed and form an important part of aquaculture systems. Their welfare must be considered.
- The discussion on sourcing of fish food must not pre-judge what is sustainable. Wild harvesting, and the sustainability of plants will need to be discussed.
- Benthic sampling should be included as a good way to look at environmental impacts.
- The group will need to ensure they do not over-focus on welfare to the expense of sustainability. There must be a balance. Handling of non-animal waste and a position on moving towards net zero should be added into the scope, and the Vet Sustain principles considered.
- Ecosystem services should be discussed, as an equivalent to the land spare/land share concept in agriculture.
- There is a new WAVMA certified aquatic Veterinary Nurses Accreditation
- The group needs to understand the current technology used in the sector and the direction of travel. This should include the use of AI, and the use of technology to help those working in aquaculture do their jobs more sustainably, eg virtually rather than travelling. A speaker from SAIC may be helpful on this topic.
- Diagnostic tools should be included, as there have been big improvements in this area in recent years, with biochemistry, swabs and non-lethal testing becoming more useful
- A definition of sustainability is needed in the position. This can be adapted from the BVA position on UK sustainable animal agriculture.
- A list of potential additional consultees was shared with the group for inclusion in the final scoping document

Actions –
- Secretariat to update scoping document

3. Review of workplan
Following previous discussions, attendees were asked to agree the the broad format of a work plan to facilitate the fulfilment of the objectives of the group.

In discussion it was noted:

- R Soutar offered to facilitate a visit to a Scottish fish farm, to help group members understanding of their scale and sophistication. It was agreed this would be useful and BVA will discuss options
- It would be useful to have a meeting focused on how fish farms currently run and the challenges the sector is facing, as well as wider discussions around sustainability and the role aquaculture plays.
• The Scottish Animal Welfare Committee is currently working on a paper for Scottish Government on predator control, including seals. It may be useful for the working group to discuss this topic soon in order to help form the BVA view on it.

• The group discussed and agreed to organize the sessions as follows:
  – Current situation and wider context
  – Environmental considerations
  – Husbandry, health and welfare
  – Forward look
  – Position review

**Actions**

– BVA to discuss options for visit to Scottish fish farm
– Secretariat to update workplan and share detailed version

4. **Overarching principles**

Attendees were asked to agree a set of overarching principles to guide the outputs of the working group. The draft suggestions were discussed and redrafted as follows:

• The group added the principle “Sustainable aquaculture should be undertaken in a way that is environmentally, ethically, and economically acceptable for consumers, producers, and wider society”

• As discussed earlier, the vet-led team hub and spoke model would not be appropriate for the aquaculture sector, and a vet-inclusive team would be a better principle to work towards.

• The human element, the role of vets in local communities and the interconnectedness of fish farms and local practices should be considered. The entire profession has a responsibility to improve their understanding of aquaculture to help others make informed decisions.

• Any further changes will be discussed on Glasscubes

**Actions**

– Secretariat to update principles and share with the group

5. **Next steps**

The next meeting is scheduled for Monday 7th March on Zoom.