DARD PROPOSALS FOR A REVISED BRUCELLOSIS TESTING REGIME - BVA / NORTHERN IRELAND BRANCH RESPONSE

1) The BVA is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom and has over 15,000 members. Our primary aim is to represent, support and champion the interests of the veterinary profession in this country, and we therefore take a keen interest in all issues affecting the profession, including animal health and welfare, public health, regulatory issues and employment matters.

2) The BVA’s Northern Ireland Branch brings together representatives of local veterinary associations, BVA’s specialist divisions, government, and research organisations in Northern Ireland. The Branch advises BVA on the consensus view of Northern Ireland members on Northern Ireland and United Kingdom issues. We have also consulted our Veterinary Policy Group which advises BVA Council on any animal health, animal welfare or public health issues of national interest.

3) We were pleased to have been given the opportunity to comment on DARD’s proposals for a revised brucellosis testing regime. In March we welcomed the announcement that an application for Officially Brucellosis Free (OBF) status had been made to the European Commission following three years brucellosis free for Northern Ireland. OBF status would mean that control measures can be reduced, which means reduced costs for farmers in Northern Ireland.

4) We understand that the proposed options for a revised brucellosis testing regime on attainment of OBF status in 2015 are as follows:

- Maintaining the current surveillance regime
- Using a risk-based approach to implement proportionate relaxations to the current surveillance regime.
- Using a risk-based approach to implement proportionate relaxations to the current surveillance regime, whilst allowing for differences in beef and dairy herds.
- Implementing the minimum surveillance controls allowable under the Trade Directive.

On the basis of a Veterinary Risk Assessment, DARD has concluded that the third option is preferred as it offers the best balance between addressing the level of risk of an outbreak remaining undetected and achieving a proportionate saving to both farmers and taxpayers on the other. We fully support DARD’s proposal to take a risk-based approach to implement proportionate relaxations.

5) In our 2014 response to DARD’s proposals for the relaxation of brucellosis pre-movement testing we supported the assessment that it would be premature to abolish pre-movement testing at that stage but once OBF status was obtained, it could be reasonable to consider further relaxations in a phased approach through to possible abolition. Whilst we support the principle of taking steps to provide proportionate cost savings to both farmers and taxpayers we urge caution with regard to the suggestion that pre-movement testing controls could be removed entirely before OBF status is obtained. We would urge similar caution with regard to the proposed move to biennial testing for beef herds before OBF status is obtained.
In conclusion, whilst we support DARD’s proposed move to a risk-based approach and proportionate relaxation, we believe that farmers and veterinarians must remain vigilant and any premature changes in advance of obtaining OBF status could send out the wrong messages. We are cautiously optimistic that Northern Ireland will be declared OBF and this will be a testament to how vets, farmers and government in Northern Ireland determinedly set out to eradicate this disease. However, while we are right to feel positive, we also know that there is still some way to go before OBF status is achieved and compliance with current testing requirements must continue to be ensured.