EFRA Select Committee - inquiry into farm gate prices

The British Veterinary Association (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.

In developing this response we have consulted with the British Cattle Veterinary Association (BCVA), a specialist cattle division of the BVA comprising 1,250 members, of whom approximately 950 are practising veterinary surgeons working with cattle in farm animal veterinary practice.

We jointly welcome the EFRA inquiry into farm gate prices. Our particular area of concern relates to the potential impact on animal welfare as a direct consequence of the financial hardship experienced by dairy farmers as a result of the fall in milk prices.

Low profitability could impact negatively on animal welfare by:

- Deterring farmers from seeking veterinary advice when needed, which as well as having animal health and welfare consequences could further compound the issues of profitability as good health and welfare is intrinsically linked to productivity

- Preventing investment in the necessary equipment, building improvements, or skilled staff which may be needed to improve welfare and therefore increase productivity and help secure the future of the farm business

The 2011 FAWC report on economics and farm animal welfare identified that the way in which farm animals are housed and treated has always been affected by monetary considerations, and that measures to reduce costs in areas such as animal husbandry, sourcing, and off-farm factors such as transport, slaughter and processing, have affected welfare. The report concludes that “The financial pressures to cut unit costs have driven many farmers to adopt some production practices which are detrimental to animal welfare. These pressures have been increased by competition within the food supply chain”

The earlier 2009 FAWC report on dairy cow welfare stated that “low profitability of dairy farming has compromised investment and maintenance on many farms which, in turn, may have hindered progress in reducing the incidence of lameness, mastitis and metabolic diseases”.

As the representative body for the veterinary profession we are also very concerned by the potential impact that reduced profitability, and therefore reduced investment by farmers in necessary preventive veterinary care, could have on the viability of rural veterinary practice, the availability of veterinary surgeons with production animal expertise, and therefore the impact on disease surveillance and the UK’s ability to respond to outbreaks of new and re-emerging disease.

We would urge the Committee to consider how trends towards cheaper food, and competition from imports from overseas where welfare standards may not be so high, can be counter-balanced by increased understanding of the cost of production and of the added value of good health and wellbeing for animals, farmers and the natural environment, so that this can be reflected in the purchase price. The role of CAP funding in supporting producers who can demonstrate a commitment to high animal health and welfare should also be explored.