

# Diocese of Hereford

## Associate Agricultural Chaplain

Serving the Church of England in Herefordshire,  
South Shropshire & parts of Powys & Worcestershire



*Dear Colleague*

### Agricultural Briefing, February 2012

A few notes about the current state of UK agriculture.

#### **Schmallenberg Virus**

Rather like bluetongue, the spread of Schmallenberg Virus (SBV), previously unrecorded in the UK, appears to have arrived with infected midges blown over from the continent. The virus appears to cause abortion, limb and brain defects in newborn animals, and loss of condition in older animals, in cattle, sheep and goats. To date it has been found on four sheep farms in eastern England and was first detected last August in cattle in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. The disease is not notifiable, which means that farmers are not legally obliged to report symptoms, but Defra is advising producers to report suspicious incidences, especially limb and brain defects in newborn animals.

#### **Slurry stores consultation**

A government consultation document on slurry stores, aimed at reducing pollution risks from agriculture, implies that all slurry stores built before 1<sup>st</sup> March 1991 may need to be replaced. The driving force for the consultation is revised nitrates regulations which come into force in 2013. The government suggest that older stores will not be built to the relevant specifications, whilst the industry, which estimates that 25% of stores will have been built before 1991 suggest that many are in good condition and adequate to the task.

#### **New animal welfare board**

Defra have made appointments to a new Animal Health & Welfare Board, set up to advise ministers on policies that affect livestock and animal welfare. However the industry is critical that only three of the ten members are farmers, six are Defra officials and one represents the horse racing industry.

#### **Wheat prices rise**

Wheat prices continue to strengthen amid concerns over drought in South America coupled with export restrictions. March futures ex-farm wheat values are at £155-157/t. Russia is also felt likely to impose an export restriction with concerns about this season's crop.

#### **Food and farming insolvencies rise**

The number of business insolvencies in agriculture, forestry and fishing businesses rose by 9.2% in 2010, totalling 107; whilst food manufacturing saw an 18.5% increase, to 109. Food retailing suffered a 7.7% rise, with 196 insolvencies. The average across all sectors was 6.3%.

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### **Badger cull sites named**

Defra has confirmed the locations of the two badger culling trials in an attempt to curb bovine tuberculosis (see previous briefings). The two general trial locations will be west Gloucestershire and west Somerset, and areas as large as 300sq km have been designated. Farmers from within these areas will be allowed to apply for culling licences for the controlled shooting of badgers. If the trial areas show that controlled shooting can be carried out safely, humanely and effectively, the policy will be rolled out elsewhere. To be granted a licence Natural England will need to be satisfied that: individuals are competent marksmen and must complete a government approved training course; participating farmers must comply with government's TB cattle controls; there are biosecurity measures in place to minimise spread of bovine TB between cattle and between badgers and cattle; there must be a high incidence of TB already present in cattle; the area to be culled must be at least 150sq km with access to at least 70%; and there must be measures to reduce the risk of badgers relocating to surrounding areas. A panel of experts led by Prof Christopher Wathes, currently chairman of the Farm Animal Welfare Committee, will monitor and evaluate the culls. Natural England expect to grant approval for licences in spring, with culling beginning in mid August, after the Olympics. It is not yet clear whether a legal challenge will be mounted to the proposals.

### **EU to promote high animal welfare standards**

A new EU welfare strategy, The Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012-2015, proposes an information campaign to educate consumers about Europe's high welfare standards, and that these may be introduced into trade agreements with non-EU suppliers. The strategy also proposes the introduction of science-based animal welfare indicators, a European network of reference centres, and common rules for all staff handling animals.

### **Campaign for the Farmed Environment**

Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) was introduced as a voluntary scheme to try and avoid burdensome environmental regulation, and a possible return to compulsory set-aside. Its success depends on demonstrating that enough farmers have voluntarily embraced environmental initiatives, so that regulation is not required. A third and final CFE monitoring survey will be sent in February to 5,500 farmers and land managers with 10ha or more arable land in England. Current figures suggest that there has been a 34% increase in land put into Entry Level Scheme (ELS) environmental stewardship since July 2009 when CFE started. This equates to almost 53,000ha and the target is almost 80,000ha by June.

### **Record student numbers**

Figures released by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show that agricultural courses saw the biggest increase in UK university enrolments compared with other subjects over the last two years, with an 11% increase in undergraduates and a 2% rise in postgraduate students. The total number of degree level enrolments to UK universities and other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remained static over the same period.

I hope this is helpful,

*Nick*