

FARMERS WEEKLY

WORKING FOR YOUR FARMING FUTURE

Quadrant House, The Quadrant, Sutton, Surrey SM2 5AS
Tel: 020 8652 4911 Fax: 020 8652 4005 E-mail: farmers.weekly@rbi.co.uk

EDITORIAL

Phone numbers: 020 8652+

General editorial inquiries

Avril Samuel/Kim Lascelles
+4911/4913

Editor Jane King +8122

Deputy editor Mike Stones +4060

Group online editor

Julian Gairdner +4084

News editor Jonathan Riley +4915

Isabel Davies +4931

Andrew Watts +4951

Europe editor Philip Clarke +4921

Business editor

Andrew Shirley +4920

Ian Ashbridge +4933

Caroline Stocks +4905

Technical editor Charles Abel +4923

Livestock editor

Jonathan Long +4922

Chrissie Lawrence +4916

Emily Padfield +4935

Arable editor Robert Harris +4934

Mike Abram +4086

Andrew Blake +4924

Paul Spackman +4082

Machinery editor Nick Fone +4919

Charlie McCarron +4918

Features editor David Cousins +4901

Farmlife editor Tim Relf +4928

Farm Womens Club

Jean Howells +4927

Group production editor

John Snuggs +4907

Lester Wilson +4938

Chris Osborne +4904

Louise Murrell +4937

Group art editor

Hugh Anderson +8688

Designer Grant Sherriffs +4072

Photographer Jonathan Page +4989

jonathan.page@rbi.co.uk

Group Projects Manager

Debbie Beaton +4080

Fwi web manager

Michael Targett +4940

Stuart Clarke +4743

Publishing Director

Trevor Parker +4002

Letters to the Editor +4911

Fax +4005

farmers.weekly@rbi.co.uk

 Reed Business Information

REGIONAL CORRESPONDENTS

South-west Olivia Cooper

01392 882 192

olivia.cooper@rbi.co.uk

Wales Robert Davies

01938 553 056

bobdavies@agrinews.fsnet.co.uk

North-west Jeremy Hunt

01282 611 015

jh@jeremyhuntassociates.com

North-east Wendy Short

01833 627 096

wendy@sykehall.freeserve.co.uk

Scotland Carol McLaren

01738 840 882

carolmclaren@lineone.net

FWI HELPDESK 0901 023 0374

RECRUITMENT ADS +8638

Fax 020 8261 8434

recruitment.services@rbi.co.uk

CLASSIFIED ADS +3222

Fax +4695

FWClassified@rbi.co.uk

Classified sales director

Christine Taylor

DISPLAY ADS

Group advertisement director

Vic Bunby +4030

South +4045

Midlands John Connor

024 7669 6502

North David Dennison

0161 246 1002

Production Kim Wells +4855

SPECIAL OFFERS

John Bunby 01753 642 234

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Dept PO Box 302, Haywards Heath,

West Sussex RH16 3YY, UK

0845 0777744 (UK)

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Scrapie U-turn shows up unneeded burdens

Scrapie, we were told nearly 10 years ago, could be masking BSE in the UK sheep flock, making breeding for scrapie resistance a matter of urgency. So urgent in fact that DEFRA instigated the National Scrapie Plan Ram Genotyping Scheme, encouraging purebred flock owners to breed for scrapie resistance.

Good to its word, DEFRA stumped up the cash to make the scheme happen. Indeed, conservative estimates would suggest DEFRA has committed more than £100m to the RGS in the past six years.

However, late last year the government's advisory body on transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, SEAC, declared there was little or no chance of BSE being present in the national flock, and so there was little or no public health benefit from breeding for scrapie resistance. And later this year DEFRA and the devolved administrations will consult on the future of the RGS.

So, what future for the RGS? The simple answer is DEFRA will no longer fund the RGS single-handedly, but will only consider continuing on a cost-sharing basis. And, while we could argue long and hard that the sheep industry has already paid a high enough price in terms of lost genetics and time spent testing sheep, there are far more important questions to be asked.

We must question the entire rationale on which much legislation is based, including specified risk material disposal and carcass splitting in animals showing more than two broad teeth. Both have added huge cost to the abattoir sector and consequently resulted in reduced prices being paid to farmers.

Most importantly and costly, though, is the ban on the burial of fallen stock, again implemented to limit the risk to human health from TSEs entering watercourses. If sheep pose no public health risk in terms of TSEs, the ban on their burial should be rescinded forthwith.

Removing these unnecessary burdens from the industry would do much to counter poor farmgate prices and allow sheep farmers a chance of a profitable future in the decoupled era, something few currently have.

And most importantly, it would demonstrate DEFRA's commitment to reducing red tape and entering a true partnership with farmers. Abandoning the RGS, as DEFRA is considering doing, would engender considerable resentment among sheep farmers. Rescinding much of this legislation would go a long way to neutralising that resentment.

It's time someone in Whitehall stood behind UK livestock farmers and fought these unnecessary, costly and ridiculous rules.

Jonathan Long *Livestock editor*

*** Breeding for resistance, which way now? p46**

DEFRA must share TB battle

Lord Rooker's hint to this week's NFU conference that licences to cull badgers in TB hotspots could be re-issued to farmers this summer is welcome news indeed, writes Philip Clarke.

But DEFRA needs to go further.

Simply giving farmers the green light to kill badgers and then leaving them to get on with it could make the situation worse, not better, especially if scientific evidence about the effects of perturbation is to be believed.

A badger cull needs to be carefully designed, drawing on the full expertise of the State Veterinary Service, targeting badgers in the right place, at the right time.

Equally important, a co-ordinated strategy, including a proper education element, is far more likely to win the public's support.

In the new spirit of "shared responsibility", DEFRA must work in partnership with farmers to deal with the problem of bovine TB, not wash its hands of it.

*** News p6 * NFU conference p16**



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