

Soil Association

Agriculture Standards Committee minutes

11.00am 26th November 2008, Cirencester

Present: John Newman (Chair), Mike Gooding, Phil Brooke, Giles Henry, Adrian Koster, Bill Yeats, Martin Peck, Peter Plate, Peter Savidge, Jean Semlyen, Chris Lewis, Christopher Stopes, Shiamala Comer, Tom Latter.

Staff: Francis Blake, Liz Austin, Rob George, Iain Rogerson, Madeleine Neal, Chris Atkinson.

1. Welcome and apologies for absence

John welcomed everyone to Abbey Home Farm. Apologies were received from Caspar Bush and John Avizienius.

2. Animal welfare outcomes

SA Certification (SACL) has trained up some inspectors for pig welfare assessment and pigs were now being incorporated into the welfare indicators work. There was concern about lack of communication with licensees about this work, as some were unaware they would have a welfare assessment during an inspection. This concern should be taken to the standards board. It was also agreed that the animal welfare outcomes needed to progress as much as possible.

3. Issues referred from SACL

3.1 Rubber matting in lairage

There had been an enquiry about the use of rubber matting instead of bedding. Rubber-topped mesh floors were also now available. The committee agreed that the acceptability of straw or rubber matting in lairage was species-dependent – pigs needed material to play with, for sheep it may be acceptable. It was agreed the standard should remain as it is.

3.2 Availability of water at lairage

It was agreed that the standard itself was clear.

3.3 Feeding young stock non-organically while milking cows convert

The committee agreed that, once the dairy cows start being fed organically, the same timing should apply to the followers as well.

3.4 Beyond calf exports

There was discussion about the ethics of shooting calves at birth, the merits of appropriate breeds and the negative health implications of moving calves at 4 weeks. The committee agreed that standard 11.2.3 needed to be taken in context with standard 11.5.18 and should stand.

4. Work plan going forward

4.1 Progress to date

There had been a lack of progress due to the standards department being one full time post down during this year. Funding had been applied for to do this work properly. The committee agreed:

- it was necessary to identify the key welfare indicators with the help of SACL and how to use them in standards
- to form a welfare outcomes working group
- the welfare outcomes approach was an important driver for more appropriate breeds, however it was important
 - o to highlight this direction so that licensees were aware of it, and
 - o for SACL to collect data on breeds to reinforce these arguments.

4.2 Revise workplan timetable

The standards manager should write to the poultry working group to update them on progress, also there needed to be a more public update to licensees generally.

4.3 New additions

It was agreed not to add any further issues at this time.

5. Use of the symbol on in-conversion produce

It was clarified that the new European organic regulation included new feed labeling requirements. It allowed a feed to be called organic when it contained at least 95% organic ingredients. However, this did not affect the requirement that ruminants be fed 100% organic feed.

6. Standards approved by council

6.1 New EU Regulation

A range of amendments resulting from the new EU regulation had been approved by the council. One that had caused concern was the requirement to apply adequate anaesthesia or analgesia for tail docking and castration of lambs. There was much discussion about the pros and cons. It was reported that Defra was leaving it to the certifiers to interpret this requirement. The committee agreed to maintain the standards on the use of rubber rings as they were.

6.2 'With permission' standards

The standards would now contain three categories, clarifying what was effectively already existing practice in the 'with permission' standards:

- justification – the licensee will need to record why they need to use an input or practice;
- approval – the licensee will need to get their use of the input approved in a plan or other mechanism;
- permission – the licensee needs prior permission on each occasion.

6.3 Spinosad, copper octanoate, potassium bicarbonate and ethylene

The council had approved spinosad, copper octanoate and potassium bicarbonate, but the standards board and council had not yet reached a decision on ethylene.

6.4 Abattoirs - mixing of social groups in lairage

The council had approved this amendment.

7. Minutes of 24 September 2008 and matters arising

Minutes approved.

8. Any other business

8.1 New allowance for 100% own-farm conversion feed

A recent amendment to the new EU Regulation made permanent the possibility for stock to be fed 100% on own-farm second-year conversion feed and for their products to be sold as organic. After some discussion, the committee agreed to allow 100% own-farm second-year conversion feed provided that the licensee has some land organic (which was an existing requirement).

8.2 Johnnes Disease

There were concerns about further outbreaks of Johnnes Disease in Europe. Further information will be sought.

8.3 Lowering demand for organic foods

It was reported that internal discussions had taken place about the increasing supply of organic foods against the reducing demand. This followed requests from a number of farmers, particularly pig and poultry producers, who were suffering extreme hardship from very high feed costs and no organic market. One possible option might be to allow those farmers to stop feeding organic feed but at the same time to stop them selling any products from their

farm as organic. When they wanted to start selling organic products again, they would then have to reconvert their breeding stock, though it would not be possible to convert meat animals.

It was explained that if this scenario was to go forward, a number of conditions would have to be met:

- Defra would need to sanction it;
- the standards board and the council would have to approve it;
- it would have to be a temporary measure, ie time limited;
- it would be important to ensure all other certifiers accepted the same ground rules.

There was general concern about this proposal. Comments included:

- the market should decide on such matters and it was dangerous to interfere;
- it was unfair on existing producers many of whom faced difficult conditions but had to abide by the standards;
- on the other hand, it was important to support producers facing such hardships where possible, and at least keep their land organic, rather than losing them completely.

After further discussion when it was clear no consensus was possible, the chair called for a vote:

- Votes in favour 6;
- Votes against 5;
- Abstentions 2.

A paper should be drawn up to take the next steps.

9. Next meeting

Plan to meet in April/May but date not set.

Welfare outcomes working group – to meet by conference call.