

CROSS PARTY GROUP IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ON ANIMAL WELFARE

49th meeting

Tuesday 20 September 2011

5.30pm Committee Room 5, Scottish Parliament

MSPs: Christine Grahame MSP (Convener)
Elaine Murray MSP
Alison Johnstone MSP

Associate Members: Patricia Saluja
Denis Hearsum, Perth and Kinross Council
Ashley Farquharson, Perth and Kinross Council
Jack Johnstone, Dogs Trust
Laura Vallance, Dogs Trust
Charles Everitt, National Wildlife Crime Unit
David Woolfries, COSLA
Louise Robertson, League Against Cruel Sports
Mike Flynn, Scottish SPCA
Ian Strachan, Scottish Government
Adam Reid, University of St Andrews
Libby Anderson, OneKind (Secretary)
Kirsty Connell, OneKind
Fiona Ogg, OneKind
Louise Robertson, League Against Cruel Sports
Nigel Miller, NFU Scotland
Tina Warren, Scotland for Animals
John Patrick, Scotland for Animals
Jacky Thow, Scotland for Animals
Freda Scott-Park, British Veterinary Association

Guests: Andrew Nicholson, The Co-Operative
Mia Fernyhough, Compassion in World Farming
Penny Ashworth, British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection

Apologies: John Scott MSP
Helene Mauchlen, British Horse Society
Natalie Waran, Jeanne Marchig Centre for Animal Welfare and Education
Jean Fairlie, Scottish Kennel Club
Brian Hosie, Scottish Agricultural College

1. Minutes of previous meeting

These were approved.

2. Matters arising

There were no matters arising.

3. Debate

The Convener (CG) introduced the main topic for the meeting, a debate on the subject: *Supermarkets – good or bad for animal welfare?* This was an important issue given the constant pressure for cheaper food, and the need for people to know more about how it was produced. She had recently visited Whitmuir Farm in

her constituency and seen the standards that pigs enjoyed there. People had divided views of how supermarkets affected animal welfare, and the debate would look at how informed choices could be made.

Andrew Nicholson, Agriculture Manager, the Co-operative (AN)

AN proposed that supermarkets were good for animal welfare and the Co-op aimed to ensure this. Animal welfare was not a new issue for the Co-op. In 1985 the Co-op had introduced its own pig assurance scheme, and had adopted a “Black Tractor” label fifteen years before the Red Tractor appeared. In 1990, it had adopted a ban on animal testing and in 1994 had joined the RSPCA Freedom Food assurance scheme. In 1995, the Co-op had challenged legislation of the time by printing production methods on egg packaging.

Retailers were gatekeepers of agricultural systems, with five large retailers accounting for 50 – 60% of UK food sales. A small number of buyers was responsible for most of the meat sold in the UK. A Gallup poll for the Co-op had shown that 71% of consumers felt that this placed a responsibility on retailers.

It was now expected that retailers would report on social and environmental issues and animal welfare was a key part of corporate social responsibility. The extent to which legislation was relied on to protect welfare was changing, and this reflected the government’s Animal Health and Welfare Strategy for Great Britain, which promoted partnership.

The Co-op’s early farm assurance scheme initially depended on its own farmers, and was taken over by producer-led schemes. Farm assurance was now firmly embedded, with 70,000 farmers now accredited by schemes.

The Co-op had helped to write the standards for the RSPCA Freedom Food scheme and had carried out the first scheme audit. As the Scottish SPCA did not run an equivalent system, RSPCA standards were applied all over the UK. Farm assurance had led directly to improvements in animal welfare.

The Co-op was good at challenging legislation and was proud that the EU egg marketing regulations now required eggs to be labelled according to their production systems. In 1996 the Co-op had run a campaign called Ending the Pain where it had committed to replace animal testing of its own-brand toiletries, and put money into alternatives research.

All retailers tended to get involved now with research into animal welfare issues such as humane stunning, and encouraged farmers to get involved. Retailers were motivated to improve animal welfare because it could improve business returns and showed proven cost-benefit advantages. Not only did it contribute to corporate social responsibility ratings, good welfare on farm and at slaughter also contributed to a better end product.

Organisations such as CIWF, VIVA and the Soil Association would often run targeted campaigns on welfare issues, and from the retailer’s perspective, the Co-op liked to take a lead. Strong working relations had been established with BUAV regarding its Humane Household Products label. Animal welfare information was put on packaging to encourage shoppers to buy a better product.

Clearer labelling was needed in other areas too. There had been “tricks of the trade” in packaging. For example, cattle imported from Ireland that had spent three months finishing in Scotland used to be labelled as Scotch Beef. Farm assurance schemes had put a stop to that. The Co-op aimed to stop confusion about country of origin – where a product contained chicken from Thailand, it would be labelled as such. The Co-op had also banned artificial colours from chicken feed.

The Co-op was proud of what it did for animal welfare, and appreciated the recognition that came in the shape of awards from Compassion in World Farming and the RSPCA.

CG asked about the labelling issue, and whether something processed in the UK could be marketed as UK produce. AN explained that it could be labelled as manufactured in the UK, or a UK brand could be bought by an external business – Howie’s Bacon, for example, was Danish-owned. Items that were heavily produced did not have to be labelled as such. AN had served on the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) for six years, during which time it had produced its welfare labelling report. FAWC had wanted to show how items were produced but there were technical difficulties in producing very large volumes of labels showing varied, specific information. It was a requirement to show country of origin, and that might change.

Mia Fernyhough, Food Business Team, Compassion in World Farming (MF)

MF explained that the Food Business Team was a new part of CIWF, carrying out a five-year programme of positive engagement aimed at placing farm animal welfare at the heart of the industry.

Animal welfare was a “must-have” component of food quality. The programme asked retailers to have high welfare options available across all product ranges, including basics, and included working with manufacturers and procurement teams as well.

The CIWF detailed supermarket survey had originally been a published document and from 2001 to 2007 had been a public benchmark showing retailers with the highest and lowest scores. It was now carried out on a confidential basis and with responses from the top seven retailers (Asda, The Co-operative, Marks and Spencer, Morrison’s, Sainsbury, Tesco and Waitrose), it had become a very important tool for the programme. Retailers were still scored and this was reflected in the CIWF awards, such as the Most Improved Award to the Co-op and the Most Compassionate Award to Waitrose this year.

The Good Farm Animal Welfare Awards were criteria-based and not only awarded to retailers. The Good Egg Award (requiring a cage-free policy on all eggs) had been in existence since 2007, with the Good Chicken and Good Dairy Awards launching this year, and a Good Pig Award was planned for 2012.

The Good Chicken Award required standards for broiler chickens that were higher than the legislation. The law permitted a stocking density of 42kg/m², but CIWF reduced this to 30kg/m², which allowed for increased activity among the birds and thus few leg problems. Slower-growing breeds were also required, because of the welfare problem of feed restriction among parent birds in the faster-growing breeds. (Birds intended for breeding ought to reach sexual maturity at 16 weeks, whereas the faster-growing breeds were intended to be fully-grown at 39 days. In order to slow down growth, therefore, the birds were not allowed enough feed to satisfy their natural appetites.) The Award also required natural light for the birds, as this influenced their feeding and social behaviour; and environmental enrichment. Altogether, out of 800 million chickens produced each year, 186 million chickens benefited from the improved standards promoted by the Good Chicken Award, with Sainsbury, The Co-operative, Marks and Spencer, and Waitrose accounting for 173 million of these.

In summary, the work of retailers was making a difference to animal welfare. Whether it was good or bad was enormously important as the top seven stores had 90% of the grocery market. The single biggest barrier was price. Retailers including Asda, Tesco and Morrison that had not received the Good Chicken Award were those that marketed heavily on price and maintained that this provided consumer choice.

Legislation usually followed behaviour. For example, the increased consumer demand for free-range eggs had led to legislation on this issue, and this was positive. However retailers that were not messaging on ethics might not make changes simply due to the positive engagement promoted by CIWF. In that case, legislation might be needed to ensure improvements to animal welfare.

Nigel Miller (NM) asked what could be done to prevent lower cost eggs coming onto Scottish markets and consumers shifting to these. On the cage-free policy, he suggested that a lot of thought had gone into the

design of the enriched cages, providing nest boxes and perches, and reducing stocking densities. Barn and free range systems could create stress while well designed and run enriched cages could improve welfare. Regarding the planned pig award, he noted that less than 50% of pigs consumed were UK-produced, and this was due to retailer policies.

CG said that legislation could change behaviour when necessary, for example the ban on smoking in public places in Scotland. MF agreed, noting that one way to change behaviour via legislation was to bring in laws on labelling. CG thought that animal welfare labels were not commonly seen, but MF said they could be seen on supermarket shelves.

John Patrick (JP) said that there was confusion over the Red Tractor label which people thought was a mark of higher welfare. It would be better for products to carry the CIWF label.

CG suggested it was seen as a middle-class preoccupation to buy free range eggs. MF thought in that case, people with less money were being done a disservice.

NM referred to the food service sector and the dedicated supply chain employed by groups such as McDonalds. MF said that CIWF worked closely with McDonalds and had given them awards.

Penny Ashworth, Ethical Standards Adviser, British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (PA)

PA said that the marketing of animal-tested products was another area where supermarkets could be good or bad. The BUAV campaigned to end all experiments on animals, by using scientific expertise, building relationships and promoting alternatives. In Scotland, 580,000 animals had been used in procedures in 2010 – an increase of 17% over 2009 – and at over 3.6million, the British figure for animal experiments stood at a 25-year high. This trend must be challenged.

The BUAV had developed Humane Standards for household products and cosmetics that avoided animal testing, and these could help consumers to navigate the wide range of different “no testing” claims on products. There were now 400 certified brands worldwide, including in UK supermarkets. The Co-operative had been one of the first to commit to these standards and others included Marks and Spencer and Sainsbury own-brand toiletries.

Supermarkets, with their wide-ranging influence, had enormous potential to demonstrate that safe and effective products could be produced without animal testing, and it was unfortunate that more supermarkets would not engage. It required bureaucracy to acquire non-animal-tested ingredients from all over the world.

The vast majority of consumers looked to supermarkets to do the hard work of sourcing ethically, and looked mainly at price. Since consumers might not understand the difference between welfare standards, it was up to supermarkets to offer the most ethical.

There was consumer interest in the issue: polling for BUAV had shown that 83% of consumers would be concerned or very concerned if household products had been tested on animals, while 96% opposed cosmetic testing. Supermarkets should reflect these concerns in their practice.

Some supermarkets already did this. Marks and Spencer were asking their contract cleaning suppliers to adopt a policy of using only cruelty-free cleaning products, and this was part of an enormous industrial supply.

The UK government had pledged to ban the testing of household products on animals, which was welcome, but only went part of the way. There was no proposal to ban the import of products tested on animals outside the UK.

PA suggested that meaningful legislative change would be the ultimate driver for improvements, but supermarkets could have a role in highlighting the issue, in demonstrating that it was possible to make excellent products without testing on animals, and in promoting these to the public.

4. Discussion

CG asked for further comments on labelling of products, and on the responsibility of public bodies such as schools and hospitals to purchase ethically.

AN agreed that labelling remained a huge issue. The Co-op had a code of practice specifically for labelling. When launching the Elmwood chicken range, they had found that offering too many different standards was too confusing for consumers, and had decided to sell two types only. They did not sell Red Tractor or any standard below that, but had made the Elmwood chicken the standard product, with another higher welfare chicken also available. Product information was displayed on the labels.

MF said that consumer focus groups showed that confusion reigned over labelling. CIWF campaigned for proper country of origin labelling that would cover where the animal was born, reared and slaughtered (which would give an indication of transport undergone).

PA agreed that labelling of products needed to be clearer. She favoured the approach taken by the Co-op for food products, in that it would not stock a low welfare option. People would get used to paying more for better welfare and should not think that they had a right to buy the cheapest option at the expense of animal welfare.

Louise Robertson (LR) drew a contrast between the standards offered for poultry, compared with less regulated production such as game bird rearing. Investigations had found overcrowded conditions and routine use of mutilations on one farm in Wales.

AN said that the Co-op was the only retailer with a store in every postal region, and it sold the high welfare products in every store, regardless of area. Most retailers did have higher welfare options but promotions tended to be at the lower end of the range.

Freda Scott-Park (FSP) said that she totally endorsed the Co-op's approach and felt that there was something fundamentally wrong with the current agricultural system. CG suggested that for change to happen, society needed to be educated.

Denis Hearsum (DH) agreed that the differing standards offered by supermarkets led to confusion, and asked how consumers were to be informed.

JP said that organisations such as CIWF and BUAV were doing tremendous work with supermarkets, but as businesses could be fickle and needed to make money, legislation would have to reinforce standards. For example the use of closed circuit television should be compulsory in slaughterhouses, and MSPs should ensure that the Scottish Parliament sourced high welfare products.

Laura Vallance (LV) referred back to CG's suggestion that purchasing free-range was a class issue. It was also a regional issue – for example as there were fewer Waitrose and Sainsbury supermarkets in Scotland, consumers might be losing out on the opportunities to choose higher welfare products, compared with south of the border.

AN said that there was less price difference between Freedom Food and Soil Association products than between Red Tractor and Freedom Food. Some retailers put in an additional category, to move consumers from the basic standard, a little at a time.

FSP said that she had given up organic dairy production as it was impossible to make a margin on the milk. She thought it fundamentally wrong the milk should be sold for a cheaper price than water. A small family farm with inherently high standards had been driven out of the market by lack of income.

Returning to the topic of labelling for animal testing standards, PA said that consumers could not be expected to understand current labels. They usually referred to testing of the finished product, but the ingredients might still have been tested on animals, making the claim meaningless. This was why the Humane Standards had been developed. She pointed out that testing on animals was meaningless in any case: even the animals most like humans were not close enough to demonstrate validity. There were numerous examples – up to 90% - products that had been tested on animals failing in human clinical studies. With reference to CG's query about public bodies' procurement policies, she said that the City of Edinburgh had brought in cruelty-free cleaning products.

Elaine Murray (EM) asked how much of the price differential for a higher welfare product would go to the producer. AN said that the Co-op did not make additional profit from the higher welfare ranges. In Fair Trade production, retailers would agree an additional fee to go back to the farmer, and it would be possible to push for other supply chains to operate that way. A small additional input to farmers could make a huge difference for their livestock.

LA raised the difference between the standards required by different farm assurance schemes. AN acknowledged this, but these were not mainly animal welfare schemes: it was assumed that items were produced according to animal welfare legislation.

6. Date of next meeting

To be advised.