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Dear Ms Barnes,

Informal Consultation Paper on the European Commission's TSE Roadmap 2

Thank you for providing the Farmers' Union of Wales with an opportunity to comment on the TSE roadmap 2. Following an internal consultation with its twelve County Branches, the Union submits the following comments for your consideration.

General Comments

The FUW welcomes the latest TSE roadmap plan as welcome move towards a proportionate and risk based approach to TSE in Europe. The FUW notes that the risk of TSE's in the food chain is now more negligible than ever, and that the UK, along with several other Member States, is now in the 'controlled risk' category according to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) categorisation of countries according to their BSE status.

Significant reductions in income occur throughout the food processing chain as a result of adhering to TSE regulation. Such losses are invariably passed back to farmers rather than on to consumers. Examples include the cost of having to finish cattle prior to the 48 month TSE testing limit and the cost of removal and disposal of Specified Risk Material (SRM) from cattle and sheep.

The Union therefore welcomes the Commission's TSE Roadmap 2 as it seeks move legislation towards a more proportionate risk-based regime. Indeed, given that the EU is approaching the eradication of BSE in cattle, the publication of the TSE roadmap 2 is both timely and well warranted.

Notwithstanding the above, the Union believes that it is important that any proposed amendments are primarily driven by balanced scientific evaluation and advice, and it is imperative that both human and animal health remain protected in order to maintain consumer confidence in the red meat sector.

Specific Consultation Questions

Q1. What is your position on a possible revision of BSE testing? Please indicate any extra conditions or specific measures.

Since the start of an expanded monitoring programme on BSE in 2001, more than 87 million cattle have been tested in the EU, in addition to those tested as BSE suspects. Following the first reported case of Bovine Spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in the UK in 1986, the number of reports of both domestic and European BSE have significantly decreased. In 2002, only 755 cases were reported in the UK and a further 891 cases were reported from the 21 other countries reporting BSE cases[1]. The number of domestic and European cases has continued to decrease and this consistent fall demonstrates the continued success of European measures such as prohibition of feeding processed animal proteins (PAP) to ruminants and intra-species recycling.

According to TSE legislation, '*a Member State which can demonstrate, based on epidemiological criteria, the improvement of the BSE situation on its territory may send an application to the Commission with a view to being authorised to revise its monitoring programme*'[2]. Since 2009, 17 Member States, including the United Kingdom, have been authorised to review their monitoring programmes and to raise the age limit for testing to 48 months, based on their favourable epidemiological situation and following positive EFSA opinions.

Correspondence from the Commission states that this increase in age limit for testing has led to a 30 % reduction in both the number of tests performed annually and the costs associated with detection of BSE in the EU. It is important to recognise that, by the Commissions own admission, such reductions kept '*the same capacity to provide a reliable insight into the prevalence and evolution of BSE in the Member States*[2]'.

Ongoing surveillance and testing programmes continue to demonstrate that the levels of BSE are ever-declining in the EU and it is now appropriate to re-evaluate BSE testing controls based on reduced risk and scientific advice.

The current limit of 48 months places significant financial pressures on the cattle industry, while also having a range of wider impacts, and the larger the upward change in the testing limit, the greater the reduction would be in these adverse impacts.

The Union would therefore welcome further increases in the age limit for TSE testing of cattle. The Unions view on this matter is warranted by a report based upon the results of the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) BSE Control Model, which provides overwhelming evidence that there is a negligible difference between setting thresholds at 42 and 60 months: A logical extension of this report would suggest that there would also be a negligible difference between setting thresholds at 48 and 60

[1] http://www.who.int/zoonoses/diseases/bse/en/

[2] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. The TSE Roadmap 2: A Strategy paper on Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies for 2010-2015 SEC(2010)899

months. The VLA has also highlighted the infinitesimal nature of the risk to human health if the completely improbable were to occur, and meat from large numbers of BSE infected animals were to enter the food chain. Specifically, it is understood that if meat from one BSE infected animal entered the food chain, the required removal of Specified Risk Material would ensure that the level of infectivity entering the food chain would be at least 12.5 million times lower than in 1993.

Given the conclusions of the VLA regarding the impact on human health, the Union firmly believes that the BSE testing age limit should be increased to 60 months, with a view to further increases in due course.

Members generally agreed with the future policy options for BSE testing as outlined in the TSE Roadmap 2. The Union supports further revision of the BSE monitoring programmes and supports a more proportionate and risk based approach to TSE legislation. Members agreed that BSE testing in Member States complying with epidemiological criteria should occur as follows:

1. Random testing of a statistical sample size of bovine animals above a certain age in the 'healthy slaughtered' category.

2. Targeted and focused testing of bovine animals in the 'risk animal' subpopulation based on their date of birth and the effective implementation of the feed ban.

The Union agrees that there remains a need for vigilance in case of a potential re-emergence of BSE or emergence of a new TSE agent in cattle and appreciates that any future option should allow the continuous detection of an increase in BSE incidences or an emergence of new TSE strains. It is essential that any revision of BSE surveillance should not prevent Member States from maintaining their OIE status as regards BSE risk.

Q2. What is your position on a possible revision of the feed ban?

Post 1986, and following extensive scientific research, processed animal proteins (PAP) were identified as the primary causative agent of BSE in UK cattle. Shortly afterwards, as a disease control measure, a statutory ban intra-species recycling was introduced. Further statutory instruments prohibited the feeding of all forms of mammalian protein to farmed livestock and banned the feeding of mammalian meat and bone meal (MBM) to farmed livestock, horses and fish. Both the feed manufacture and supply industries and the livestock sector achieved an extremely high level of compliance with these new regulations. This high level of compliance with domestic and European feed policy is believed to be almost wholly responsible for the significant and on-going decline in the number of global cases of BSE[3]'.

With this in mind, the Union's members believe it would be prudent to delay any possible revision of the feed ban until rigorous and scientific analyses can conclusively prove that such a relaxation would have minimal impact on animal and

[3] http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/animal-health/animal-diseases/bse/bse-feed-ban.htm

human health. Proposing a relaxation of the feed ban based simply on a decline in the number of reported BSE cases fails to recognise the important contribution played by the various changes in feed policy in achieving this decline. The aim of the BSE-related feed control policy in the UK and EU should primarily be to ensure the *continued decline* and *eventual eradication of BSE*. Scientific analyses of BSE demonstrate that effective controls placed on livestock feed are the key to achieving disease eradication. Furthermore, given the remaining concessions and revisions included in the present consultation, such as a re-evaluation of the BSE testing regime, it remains justifiable to apply a more cautionary approach when revising feed policy; especially given that such policy is believed to be responsible for the current decline in BSE incidence.

The Union recognises that the revisions made in the present consultation would allow PAP to be utilised in the feed of pigs, poultry and fish and that no effect on the prohibition of intra-species recycling is discussed. However, the Union believes that there can be no room for complacency when reviewing the current feed ban.

Members unanimously believed that a zero-tolerance approach should be applied to any potential changes to the feed ban in order to conclusively ascertain that there is no possible risk or contamination. The majority of members believed that, in this context, any relaxation of the feed ban should only be applied when the disease had been completely eradicated.

Q3. In the context of the TSE Roadmap 2, what are your other priorities?

i. Specified Risk Material

Concerns that BSE may have been introduced into sheep populations through the consumption of contaminated feedstuffs have been significantly alleviated in recent years. Despite continued and thorough pan-European testing of millions of sheep – both in the healthy slaughter and the fallen stock stream - there remains, to date, no single positive case of naturally occurring BSE in ovines[4]. Whilst the Union recognises that a BSE-like disease can be *experimentally* transferred to sheep via oral inoculation with BSE brain homogenate[5], this artificially produced infection bears no resemblance to the natural situation and it is therefore unfortunate that the costly TSE measures currently in place are based on both artificial and unrealistic data.

Indeed, to date, all tests conducted on natural scrapie cases have failed to yield a BSE-like strain, and there remains no evidence of the existence of BSE in natural sheep and goat populations[6,7].

Specified Risk Material (SRM) controls for sheep have been in place in the UK since 1996. Due to the severe financial implications imposed when adhering to sheep SRM regulations, the Union has consistently argued against the need to remove spinal cord

[4] Tang *et al*. (2010) Journal of Immunological Methods, **356** (1-2), pp: 29-38.
[5] Van Keulen *et al*. (2008) Archives of Virology, **153** (3), pp: 445 – 453.
[6] Hansermann *et al*. (2010) BMC Veterinary Research, **6**, Article Number 20.
[7] Hagenaars *et al*. (2010) BMC Veterinary Research, **6**, Article Number 25.

from sheep classified as being over 12 months of age. Spinal cord removal can significantly devalue the carcass by as much as 80 percent and, given the absence of scientific evidence linking contamination from ovine spinal chords to human health issues, the Union believes that current EU sheep SRM regulations represent a costly and disproportionate reaction to a negligible risk to human health.

Given the wealth of evidence available, the Union believes a review of the current SRM regulations, as they apply to sheep older than 12 months of age, is well warranted. Whilst the Union believes that the removal of spinal cord in older sheep is unjustifiable and disproportionate, the Union would also welcome scientific research into alternative solutions to prevent the need to remove the spinal cord of sheep.

iii Scrapie Eradication Measures

Classical scrapie in sheep is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) present in most sheep-producing countries. The current European TSE surveillance programme in small ruminants led to the discovery of atypical scrapie (AS); a rare disease which preferentially exists in older sheep carrying a specific genotype.

Alongside selective breeding programmes, current programmes for the eradication of TSEs in sheep flocks employ a variety of mechanisms, including the culling of susceptible animals in infected flocks and reinforced surveillance in infected flocks. Despite mounting evidence regarding the difference in both epidemiology and pathology between 'classical' and 'atypical' scrapie, stringent control measures are still applied to European sheep flocks following the detection of a single AS case.

The epidemiological and pathological features of AS are generally considered to indicate that the disease occurs spontaneously and is not particularly contagious under natural conditions [8,9]. Recent research has suggested that the TSE control measures currently in force would allow *'appropriate control of classical scrapie'* but would not be '*more efficient than active surveillance in detecting cases of atypical scrapie*'[10].

The Union appreciates that special measures in place for atypical scrapie allow animals to be exempted from culling. However, such flocks must still submit to an intensified TSE surveillance programme in the two breeding years following detection and are prohibited from moving out of the herd.

Given the scientific evidence available, the Union believes it is time to adapt the current TSE eradication measures as they relate to infected flocks of sheep in order to bring them in line with the latest scientific knowledge pertaining to atypical scrapie**.** Given that recent scientific data confirms that this scrapie strain is not contagious, the Union would welcome a re-evaluation of current European scrapie control measures and would welcome the adaptation of such measures to account for the different epidemiology and pathology of AS.

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[8] Detwiler and Bayliss (2003) Rev Sci Tech, **22**, pp: 121-143.
[9] Fediaevsky *et al*. (2008) BMC Veterinary Research, **4**, Article Number 19
[10] Fediaevsky *et al*. (2010) The Veterinary Journal, **185** (3), pp: 338-340.

With this in mind, the Union welcomes work which aims to further our understanding in this area and eagerly awaits the results of the scientific assessment jointly performed by EFSA and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) on any possible association between TSEs in animals and humans. The results of this work could be of great interest as regards the zoonotic potential of TSEs in small ruminants.

Susceptibility of sheep to scrapie infection is known to be modulated by the PrP genotype of the animal. Scrapie control programmes, based on sheep genetics, have been initiated across the EU and include programmes residing in the UK, the Netherlands and France. The Union notes that some success has been achieved in this field, with increases in the level of genetic scrapie resistance and a significant decline in the prevalence of scrapie in tested animals[7, 11].

The Union has therefore previously supported the promotion and funding of genetic control of scrapie in sheep through breeding programmes. However, the Union would strongly affirm that a proportionate and informed approach to genetic control of the disease is necessary in order to preserve other valuable genetic traits, and avoid inbreeding or genetic drift.

ii. On-farm Burial

In the UK, quantitative risk assessments have been developed for environmental exposure to BSE and BSE risk assessment continues to be the driver for policy options relating to carcass waste disposal[12].

A review of BSE risk assessments in the UK[13] has concluded that the perceived risks of BSE environmental contamination may be overinflated and may even function to detrimentally affect the management of other diseases, such as Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD). Indeed, during the 2001 FMD outbreak in the UK, a ban on the burial of slaughtered cattle on farm led to FMD-infected carcasses being transported great distances for alternative disposal methods; a strategy that potentially facilitated the spread of FMD across the UK[13].

Despite a current emphasis on protecting water supplies from contamination with the BSE agent, recent research denotes that the '*BSE agent being an insoluble and sticky particulate is unlikely to end up in tap water, and the possibility of a threshold effect for BSE together with dispersion of particulate matter in the aquatic environment, would render the risks from water negligible*'.

Given that the Union is unaware of any recorded incidence whereby the responsible on-farm burial of livestock has led to a human health issue, the cost of collection and disposal of fallen stock represents a disproportionate TSE related regulation. To date, there remains no credible evidence to support this regulation. The Union would therefore welcome a revision of the rules pertaining to on-farm burial and would ultimately support a return to previous legislation.

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[11] Dawson (2008) Veterinary Research, **39**, Article Number 25.
[12] Gale (2004) Veterinary Records, **155**, 77-82.
[13] Gale (2006) Journal of Applied Microbiology, **100** (3), pp: 417-427.

The current regulations impose significant unnecessary costs on the farming industry, and have an adverse impact on the environment due to the requirement to transport and incinerate/render by-products. Such impacts contradict UK and EU objectives in terms of better regulation and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

I trust that due consideration will be given to the preceding information.

Yours

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