FOCUS ARTICLE: DEFRA CONSULTATION ON RESPONSIBILITY AND COST SHARING

Responsibility and Cost Sharing (RCS) team, Defra.

On 25th January 2010, Defra published for pre-legislative scrutiny and public consultation a draft Animal Health Bill to help implement its plans for responsibility and cost sharing (RCS) to deliver improved animal health and welfare in England.

The main provisions of the draft Bill will:
- establish the ‘Animal Health Organisation’ to take over from Defra responsibility for animal health policy and delivery in England;
- put on a statutory footing the role of the Chief Veterinary Officer (UK), who will be based in Defra;
- simplify existing provisions on payments for animals slaughtered, or things seized or destroyed, for disease control purposes in England and Wales. It will also introduce express provisions to allow reductions in payments where a person has contributed to the spread of disease or breached relevant regulations; and
- broaden existing powers in England and Wales to collect and test veterinary samples and vaccinate animals to help in disease management.

The proposed animal health organisation would be led by an independent chair and board. The board would have an understanding of animal health, including knowledge of industry across all species, financial, corporate governance, public sector management, public health and veterinary science, and wider issues including wildlife and consumers. Recruitment would follow the Nolan principles, with appropriate input from industry experts in the recruitment and selection of suitable candidates. The board would be accountable to Parliament and Ministers, animal keepers, the wider public and other stakeholders, and subject to external scrutiny and challenge.

Defra consider that building greater responsibility sharing through the establishment of the proposed Animal Health Organisation will only help to bring about the essential behaviour change sought in the livestock sector in relation to risk if suitable financial contributions and incentives are also introduced. Defra consulted last year on measures requiring keepers to pay for some of the annual costs of surveillance and preparedness for exotic disease outbreaks. The intention is that keepers of all disease susceptible species should share these costs. The necessary cost sharing measures will be introduced by the Government under a future Finance Bill.

Two good examples of where the equine sector has benefitted from Defra’s disease prevention and control measures, together with new arrangements to ensure improved partnership working are (1) the recent detection of equine infectious anaemia in horses in Wiltshire as a result of post import testing, and the subsequent management of the disease incident; (2) the development of the African Horse Sickness control strategy.
Defra has established a joint industry-Government advisory group to help work together to set-up the proposed new body. It will advise on the detailed design and ways of working, to ensure that a new independent body has the confidence of industry and the public. The establishment of an Advisory Group demonstrates Government’s commitment to working with industry, and it responds directly to calls from many organisations for a greater involvement in policy development. This group is chaired by Rosemary Radcliffe, and Prof. Tim Morris of the British Horse Industry Confederation and Prof. Bill Reilly from the British Veterinary Association sit on the group.