

**Date:** Thursday 14 September 2000  
**Time:** 2.00pm to 4.20pm  
**Venue:** Committee Room, National Assembly Building

## **REPORT OF THE ASSEMBLY SECRETARY FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **Meetings/Visits**

1. Since my appointment at the end of July, I have had a wide range of meetings with industry leaders and carried out a few farm visits. I also visited some of the county agricultural shows which has given me a valuable opportunity to get up to speed with my brief and to hear at first hand the concerns of the farming industry.
2. My programme has also involved two visits to North Wales. On 31 August, I met representatives of all the main farming organisations in Caernarfon to discuss a wide range of agricultural issues. The following day, I visited a hill farm in Snowdonia to discuss with a group of farmers their concerns; and paid a visit to the dairy processing plant of South Caernarfon Creameries at Pwllheli. Last Friday, I visited the Agriculture Department's office in Caernarfon to meet some of the staff.
3. Last week, I visited the Llanboidy cheese making plant at Whitland; met staff at the Carmarthen Divisional Office and attended the UN/FAO Rural Summer School in Pembrokeshire. There are further visits and meetings planned for the next few months, both in South and North Wales, to enable me to see and hear at first hand the concerns and aspirations of the agri-food industry in Wales.

### **Rural Development Plan/Tir Mynydd**

4. We await the Commission decision on the Wales Rural Development Plan. This is expected to go before the Commission's STAR Committee for approval next week. We have been working closely with Commission officials to answer some last minute queries on points of detail in the Plan; however, these are not substantive.
5. The proposed Tir Mynydd scheme for the Less Favoured Areas is an integral part of the Plan and the only outstanding issue concerns stocking rates. We are working hard to ensure that the text on stocking rates that is eventually agreed takes due account of the current position in Wales. Once we have secured Commission approval of the Plan, we will be writing to every eligible farmer in the LFA explaining the Tir Mynydd scheme in more detail and providing them with a claim form.

### **GM trial, Flintshire**

6. A public meeting has now been arranged to discuss the ongoing GM farm scale evaluation at Sealand in Flintshire. It will be held at the Community Centre in Connahs Quay on Thursday, 14 September, and will be chaired by Bob Macey, Head of the Assembly's Environment Division. The meeting will give the local community a chance to hear a series of talks about the evaluation trial. Those present will also be able to put any questions or concerns that they have to a panel consisting of a Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions official; a scientist from the independent researchers working on the evaluation; and a representative from the biotechnology industry group, SCIMAC (Supply Chain Initiative for Modified Agricultural Crops).

### **Farmers Helpline**

7. The Farmers' helpline is in operation, with calls being referred to FRCA through the Business Connect number and Divisional Offices. The calls have varied greatly with requests for information from mushroom growing, composting, water bottling, farm building grants, Quad biking, farm attractions and game rearing to list but a few. The service has been promoted widely through the various agricultural shows and meetings with partner organisations.

### **Farm Innovation Service (FIS)**

8. Following the presentation by Fred Cunningham to the last Committee meeting, work is well advanced to incorporate the Group's proposals into the Regional Agri-Food Action Plan that is being written for the use of Objective 1 funding, and more generally. Discussions have been held with a very wide range of organisations and work has started on identifying the financial requirements to establish FIS, job specifications and defining roles and remits. With the agreement of the chair, I would plan to submit a paper to the Committee on this matter in October.

### **Welsh Meat Company**

9. Since the closure of the share offer on 28 June the company, with the Committee's support, has been working to develop alternative proposals to help the livestock sector to develop.

10. The new proposals, which were announced recently, involve conversion to a co-operative structure including support from the supply co-operatives and joint venture arrangements with slaughter/processing interests which will allow an earlier move into processing. On 1 August, the company wrote to all 700 farmers who supported the original share offer explaining the new proposal and inviting them to support it. Details about potential partners and the investor response to date are commercially confidential until they are announced by the company. This announcement is expected shortly.

### **Classical Swine Fever**

12. In **England** since 8 August, 7 cases of classical swine fever have been confirmed in East Anglia, the

latest being on 5 September. In each case, a Declaratory Order was introduced by MAFF which defines an Infected Area and imposes restrictions on the movement of pigs (and other species of animal if there are pigs on the premises). Some pig farms are located in more than one Infected Area, as these overlap.

13. Regulations amending the Animals and Animal Products (Imports and Exports) (England and Wales) Regulations 2000 and covering Classical Swine Fever were made exceptionally on an England and Wales basis by the Minister of Agriculture with my agreement. These made changes lifting the ban in England apart from the three counties of Suffolk, Norfolk and Essex. This effectively allowed the exports from Wales of pigs by allowing the movement of pigs through England.

14. On 5 September, the European Commission's Standing Veterinary Committee met and decided that:

- the export ban on live pigs from Norfolk and Suffolk should be extended to 15 October;
- the ban on exports from Essex should lapse on 15 September, provided there were no further cases in the county, and the relevant surveillance and protection zones had been lifted;
- the UK could consider placing meat from surveillance zone SF2000/02 (the westerly zone in Norfolk) on the market, subject to strict conditions.

15. In **Wales**, three farms which were suspected as having contact with farms in East Anglia have had all their restrictions lifted. These farms in Llandinam, Llanymynech and Whitland were finally cleared by Thursday 31 August and all premises in Wales are now free of movement restrictions imposed as a consequence of a contact with the present outbreak of Swine Fever or disease being suspected on the farm.