



MEAT LABELLING MEETING

The Associate Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare

An all party group for members of both houses at Westminster formed to promote and further the cause of animal welfare by all means available to the Parliaments at Westminster and in Europe

ATTENDEES: Neil Parish (Member of Parliament), David Bowles (RSPCA), Charles Bourns (National Farmers Union), Andrew Opie (British Retail Consortium), Nicola Heath (BRC), Peter Stevenson (Compassion In World Farminf), Marisa Heath (APGAW)

Purpose of Meeting: To examine the case for the provision of animal welfare information in the form of an addition to labels on meat produce.

Outcome:

RSPCA and **CIWF** feel that clear information on food labels regarding animal welfare is required which will drive better standards forward. They believe that chicken is particularly in need of a clear standardised terms and refer to the labelling for eggs as a successful example.

Neil Parish holds the view that better information on animal welfare will promote British farmers who already meet high standards than European producers. Clear information will reveal the lower levels of non-British meat.

NFU state that there is a difference between eggs and broiler meat as the eggs are not physically different whatever the method of production whereas the meat product can be smaller, with less meat and value for money as it is a different bird being grown for organic, different for free range and different for barn reared. 70% of British standard chicken produced has natural light, straw bales and perches which is a good standard already. **Neil Parish MP** believes this pushes the case to label to clearly identify the remaining 30% are of the lowest standards and most likely not British.

The key area of disagreement continues to be around the definition of welfare standards. **RSPCA** and **CIWF** believe the issues surrounding stocking density, growth rate and genetics are ignored as a point of welfare under the current standards so whilst 70% of poultry has improved living conditions with the natural light and perches, it does not address those other issues affecting welfare. **CIWF** wants to see each system identified to the consumer in a similar way to eggs. However, the **NFU** feel that the stockmanship can be more relevant than the choice of production as a farmer can do barn reared chickens to a good standard of care where another farmer may do free range to a poor standard and it is difficult to take that into account with a welfare label. Whilst **CIWF** and **RSPCA** acknowledge that this can be true, they still hold the view that the welfare varies depending on the choice of production owing to issues like density and growth rate so feel it is clear that high welfare standards are better met by free range for example and this should be clearly identifiable.

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BRC and **NFU** hold the view that information is already available. They feel commitments from large retailers like Tesco to buy British means that the Assured Food Standards offers a good quality product. It was also felt the Country of Origin labelling due to be extended later this year would provide more information pushing the consumer to buy the British meat that is of a better welfare standard.

Stance from **BRC** is that retailers need to grow with their consumers so the signal is not given to produce higher welfare meat which then does not sell. This is backed up by the **NFU** who have experience of farmers trying to produce high welfare chicken and having to return to standard chicken as the sales fell. In the current economic climate the smaller bird with little breast meat can be a difficult sale. The consumer must indicate they want higher welfare along with the other drivers of choice including price, promotion and best before end. **NFU** feels the tiers are in existence but have not been explained to customers. **RSPCA** and **CIWF** agree that more needs to be done to inform the consumer about methods of farming and their impacts on animal welfare but this needs to be supported by **Government** and **BRC**.

RSPCA sees the best way forward as having EU harmonised standards that set out agreed terms for chickens with the minimum criteria for each category of production system defined in a similar way to eggs, although they acknowledge it may vary in some ways as there are differences at the sale point of chickens and eggs. There is an opportunity to push for this next year as the standards are coming up for renewal.

Conclusion: BRC and NFU feel that adequate labelling is currently in place and it is not the right time to bring in additional information owing to the economic climate. **RSPCA and CIWF** feel that the current labelling is not clear and consumers are confused so there is a need for clarification.

Points of Agreement

■ More needs to be done to create a drive within the consumer for higher welfare products so the producers can then move to fulfil a growing market. So the focus needs to be on consumer demand at this point which all the stakeholders and Government can work for. This can be achieved by better information and education for the consumer on welfare standards and methods of production.

■ There needs to be a more pro-active way of promoting the higher standards rather than highlighting the lower standards. This is a more positive approach which will be supported as a way of boosting sales and therefore, could have the support of retailers.

■ The current position of voluntary labeling systems in practice would not generally cover products from intensive indoor production systems meaning voluntary labeling would fail to label the majority. Labeling would need to be compulsory so needs to be driven by Government rather than expecting farmers and the BRC to take the risk.

■APGAW must request that Defra push for the EU harmonised standards which will define the production systems with the minimum criteria set out. Only with the agreement of what constitutes each welfare level will the issue be able to move forward and only with wide acceptance will British famers be able to use labeling setting out the levels to benefit them and support the UK farming industry.

Action: Neil will write to Defra Minister setting out the points above and making clear the concerns of the BRC and NFU to welfare labeling.