

Soil Association

Agriculture Standards Committee

24th October 2007 Summary Minutes

Present: Henry Bagenal (Chair), John Avizienius, Caspar Bush, Giles Henry, Peter Savidge, Jean Semlyen, Tom Latter, Phil Brooke, Ade Mafo.

Staff: Francis Blake, Isabel Griffiths, Iain Rogerson, Madeleine Neal, Helen Whyte, Sarah Hathway, Amanda Woodman-Hardy.

Apologies: Martin Peck, Bill Yeats, Chris Lewis, Adrian Coster, John Newman, Peter Plate, Carl Barton, Hugh Bourne, Peter Ord, Tony Connelly, Richard Cooke.

1. Minutes of meeting of 7th March 2007 and matters arising

Primary habitat - this standard did not go forward for consultation due to concerns about wording. It will be going out to consultation next year instead.

2. New standards setting structure

The new governance proposals were going to the council next week for a final decision.

3. Brainstorm on animal welfare standards development for 2008

The committee brainstormed developing the work plan for 2008. The standards board had suggested there were not enough resources to consider standards for camelids, dairy sheep and goats, and increasing forage content of ruminant diets in 2008, which were amongst the priorities already identified. Therefore the committee should concentrate on animal welfare. The committee identified the following areas, grouped into working groups:

1. Outcome based standards (balance of prescriptive v outcome-based standards; thresholds for outcome-based assessments; training; welfare of non-farm animals)
2. Breeding (appropriate breeds; breeding technologies)
3. Health plan (more teeth; external expertise input; adequate review; treatments - vitamins, minerals, vaccines; review of mutilations).
4. Abattoirs (welfare in lairage at abattoirs; favouring smaller local abattoirs; transport).
5. Poultry - to be integrated with the other work areas above (seasonal poultry; feed quality; slaughter; transport; catching; water for waterfowl; health planning – ongoing implementation issues tying into health plans; breeding poultry; despurring; housing unit size; standards based on welfare outcomes; slow/fast growing strains).

4. Issues referred from SACL

4.1 Abattoir and slaughtering

Transport, feeding and waiting times - the original amendment was withdrawn and this proposal aims to address the potential problem of feeding just before transport in the event of an expected long journey followed by a long wait in lairage. It was agreed to hold this over to the review of the lairage standards.

Slaughtering as first of the day vs first of species – recognising that this would help smaller abattoirs, this standard was agreed for consultation.

4.2 Use of ash from biofuel plant in livestock bedding

Proposal for a trial – there was concern at the high pH of ash which could cause injury/irritation to the animal. It is mixed with sand and straw, so reducing the pH, and the higher pH acts to reduce infection. The committee agreed to allow this material both as bedding and to spread on the land (following composting), provided:

- it is only for the duration of the trial
- SACL receives a copy of the review once completed
- the milk is analysed during and at the end of the trial to check for possible contaminants
- the results of the trial are positive.

4.3 Clarification of interpretation of standards

Standards 10.9.5 - the committee clarified that loss of organic status should occur at the start of the fourth course of treatment and that this applies in any 12 month period.

Standard 11.1.1 – the committee clarified that the extended withdrawal period does not apply when selling the milk as non-organic (during the conversion period) but does apply when selling the milk as organic (if treatment occurred at the end of the conversion period).

5. Enzymes in poultry feeds

The standard is very restrictive on the use of enzymes, allowed only where herd/flock deficiency can be demonstrated. This is very unlikely and the issue is more one of correcting deficiency of the feed (eg allowing an increased percentage of barley or triticale). The committee agreed that permission needed to be at the level of the feed manufacturer, not the farmer. It was felt that allowing enzymes not only enabled specific cereals to be used in greater quantity, but more generally it enables higher digestibility of lower quality feed ingredients. The danger was the difficulty in distinguishing between genuine deficiency and commercial expedience. The committee agreed that SACL should have the option to give permission to feed mills, on a case by case basis following evaluation, in the event of deficiency of available ingredients. An appropriate amendment will be drafted.

6. Health plans for equines

SACL proposed that a health plan for equines was unnecessary as other aspects of the standards cover the main issues. It was agreed to hold this over to the review of the health plan standards.

7. Cannulating cows for rumen bacteria instead of antibiotics in the USA

This practice is used with organic dairy cows in the USA because antibiotic treatment is not allowed. There was general agreement that this practice constituted an unnecessary mutilation and was therefore completely unacceptable. It should be regarded as an equivalence barrier.

8. Converting quickly using a small area of organic land

SACL reported that a farm could start selling organic produce provided at least a small part of the land was organic (and other conversion conditions were met). There was agreement that, whilst this may be against the spirit of the standard, it was within the letter and was allowed.

9. Blue tongue - update

There was some concern about the types of insecticides that may be allowed on affected land. Currently, none were acceptable - the extended withdrawal periods overlap the necessary treatment frequency.

10. Any other business

There was increasing interest in sexed semen as part of the answer to the dairy bull calves issue. It is not currently mentioned in the standards, and this committee previously accepted that no mention means it is not prohibited (provided the separation method was mechanical, rather than chemical). However, with increasing interest, it was appropriate to specifically mention it.