

General Secretary's Report



Hello to you all,

Last month, the Association met with, for the first time, Mr. Andrew Rhodes, Director of Operations at the FSA. This was as the first of the years bi-annual meetings that we have agreed to hold.

There were three items that we had suggested for the agenda;

- 1) Progression towards achieving formal professional recognition.
- 2) Corporate subscriptions.
- 3) FSA field management structure.

Mr. Rhodes wished to add one item, that of bullying and harassment in the workplace.

1) Progression towards achieving formal professional recognition

We updated Mr. Rhodes as to where we currently are in working to achieving PR, and presented him with the suggested timescale (subject to ratification by Council in June) and the set of questions and answers that follow this report.

We stated our opinion that the whole process had moved on very rapidly since our meeting with Steve McGrath in April of

last year, certainly further than at any time in the past. We feel that is largely due to the fact that a proposed review of the Veterinary Regulations has been announced and doors that were previously closed to us are now being held open. The RCVS have declared their support for us in this venture and Mr. Rhodes re-iterated the FSA's support, stating that "an enhanced professional standing of MHI's should lead to an increased consistency" and that this is what he wished to happen.

He went on to say that the documentation was exactly what he wished to see at this point but that it was one thing to see this kind of information written down but that it was another thing entirely to see forward movement on this issue.

We informed him that PR had been presented at divisional AGM's and the national AGM by way of a power point presentation (now available on the website) and that all feedback had been positive and it is the intention of the Association to move ahead with PR.

When the timescale is approved, the next significant stage will be a formal proposal at the 2012 AGM to put a voluntary non-statutory register in place alongside the current membership register, together with a formal code of conduct for MHI's signing up to the new register.

Mr. Rhodes then went on to say that in his opinion, this could only be a good thing as he recognised the role that MHI's play and his belief that they have a "pivotal role in making the whole system work".

He did ask if the perceived preference was for MHI's to be "known as MHI's or OA's.

We informed him that this question was asked of us some four/ five years ago and the consensus was that industry recognised us as inspectors and that MHI's preferred to be known as inspectors, although it was recognised and accepted that our role would be referred to as OA in the regulations.

2) **Corporate subscriptions**

We asked Mr. Rhodes if the PR was sufficiently advanced to secure corporate subscription payments for FSA employed members or if there were any other issues that needed to be addressed further.

He replied that PR progress was as much as might reasonably have been expected at this point in time but expressed his desire for the suggested timescale to be adopted.

He went on to say that there had been some major discrepancies between the AMI and FSA lists of employed members in the past, and that he would expect this to be better in the future.

We then ran through the procedure we have adopted when we receive notification of people who have left the employment of the FSA, and that we believed that past problems had occurred because employment of "casual" MHI's had confused the issue. This should have been rectified with the FSA's provision of a comprehensive list of members listed by us as employed by FSA but who were no longer so, at the end of 2010, something that we had requested several times previously.

It was agreed that the AMI should provide a list three times annually to prevent such large discrepancies occurring in the future;

a) In April - at the end of the financial year.

b) August/September - at the end of the summer.

c) December - at the end of the calendar year.

With these provisions in place, Mr. Rhodes suggested that corporate subscriptions could be paid.

We replied that we recognised that we are in times of austerity and to reflect the savings that the FSA have been obliged to make we would not seek an increase but would ask for the status quo to remain. We went on to say that Steve McGrath had previously put in place a two year deal and that this had proved enormously helpful to the AMI in our forward planning and that perhaps this could be considered again.

Mr. Rhodes said that he would take this suggestion forward for consideration and that he would get back to us in due course when the decision had been taken.

3) **FSA Field Management Structure**

Mr. Rhodes set out his vision of the structure in the future, stating that devolution and devolved boundaries had to be taken into account and FSA boundaries formed to reflect this. England would then be divided into four areas which would allow for numbers of plants in each to be roughly equal and that he anticipated this to happen within a two year window.

He made clear his desire to see Lead OV's move into FSA employment and the role of team leaders to move away from OV's and back under the umbrella of the FSA. He stressed that this was not a reflection of performance on behalf of the OV's currently in the positions but that this was a point of principle that he felt very strongly about.

Middle management would also be "strengthened" with the creation of Supervisory MHI's in large teams and

plants. This would make a new career ladder possible for MHI's.

He also stated that it was possible that MHI's could be moved into other areas of the FSA's remit and cited Shellfish as one area that was currently being looked at.

Also, new MHI's are to be trained to introduce "young blood" into the industry to preserve the knowledge base that currently exists.

We informed Mr. Rhodes that we had included FSA Field Management Structure on the agenda because we felt that the revised structure was a very positive move, welcomed by the Association and had expressly wished to offer our support. We had expressed concern in the past about possible conflicts of interest and the fact that contracting agencies appraising civil servants had been a point of concern for many members.

4) **Bullying and Harassment**

Mr. Rhodes re-iterated the tough line that he is taking with matters of bullying and harassment of FSA staff and stated that it was "intolerable". Addressing this subject is one of his highest priorities and he has taken a personal stance on this as well as presenting a very public stance and has made FBO's and industry representatives very aware that bullying and harassment of staff would be met very robustly.

He went on to say that he also expected MHI's in their turn to be "whiter than white" and to recognise that they are government officials and to behave in a professional manner appropriate to this role.

This would serve to strengthen his position and to be better able to protect his staff.

We welcomed these comments and stated our support for the initiative. Protection of MHI's from bullying and harassment can only serve to allow MHI's to be more

effective in their role, and this can only help to maintain/raise standards of meat inspection.

The Value of Meat Inspection

Some time ago, the Association was challenged by the then Director of Operations, Steve McGrath to use science and evidence to back up the work that the Meat inspector does. I have to say here and now, that this thought filled me with dread. As you all will appreciate, often the only time that MHI's tend to get any real sort of feedback is if things go wrong. The fact that we actually do such a good job for the vast majority of the time means that this is what comes to be expected, and maybe rightly so. But it does mean that it makes it rather difficult, if not impossible, to prove that competent meat inspection plays a vital role in the production of safe meat. In a nutshell; "how do you go about proving a negative"?

How many people might have got sick if an MHI hadn't spotted that contamination and had it removed? How many folk might have been affected if an MHI hadn't recognised that pyaemic carcase, and rejected it as unfit for human consumption? And so and on....!

But not so long ago, as I was out walking the dog on a sunny Spring afternoon, what I believe to be a credible answer hit me round the face like an old piece of tripe!!!

The answer, in my opinion, lies in exactly how many FBO's dispute the decision to reject a carcase as unfit for human consumption? And we all know that this happens from time to time!!!

Let me elaborate my thinking;

Every MHI in the country, indeed in Europe, should be working to the same set of regulations, been trained in the same sort of manner, with access to the same sort of science, and thinking and

should therefore, be in the same sort of mindset when it comes to the inspection of meat. Simply put, a carcass presented with signs of a systemic disturbance should be as plainly obvious to any one meat inspector as to another, because we are all in the same way of thinking. I would like to think that where there might be any ambiguity or a "borderline" case, then co-operation and dialogue within the team would see the correct decision arrived at and the correct action taken, but I hope you can appreciate my point.

It should also be noted at this point that the rejection of meat is easy in itself. But justification of that rejection takes knowledge and training and in some cases no small degree of experience and I simply do not believe that any MHI is going to reject meat unless they believe it is unfit.

Which brings me back to my original point;

If an MHI has rejected a carcass, then why would an FBO contest that decision unless;

a) They believe that MHI to be incompetent?

b) They themselves lack the knowledge and training that has led to that MHI making that particular decision?

or

c) They are being blinkered by purely commercial reasons and cannot see beyond the lost value of that carcass?

To answer point a);

All MHI's will have passed a written exam to demonstrate their knowledge and will have had practical assessments where they will have demonstrated their capabilities. In short, they are qualified to make that decision or else they would not be permitted to do the job.

Point b);

I have worked in some plants where the foreman is qualified in meat inspection, and I have never had a problem with the rejection of a carcass in such plants. Food for thought there perhaps?

As to point c);

If any FBO is contesting a decision purely on commercial grounds then I believe that is exactly why the MHI should be there, why the MHI must remain independent from industry and why industry cannot be allowed to self regulate.

It does not exactly prove in a scientific manner that what we do goes to safeguard public health, but as long as FBO's continue to argue against rejected carcasses, I believe it does go to justify the case that what we do helps to safeguard public health.

Seminar

Bookings for seminar are now being taken; please contact Ken Rufus if you would like to book a place, a booking form is included in this edition in such a manner that you can use it without ruining your copy.

I hope to meet many of you in Nottingham in September.

keep up the good work.

Regards,

Ian Robinson