

General Secretary's Report



Midlands Divisional Meeting

I attended the Midlands divisional meeting in November at their invitation. The officers in this division had taken the initiative and invited their local MEP's to attend and Roger Helmer of the Conservative Party and Derek Roland of the United Kingdom Independence Party both accepted. What followed at this meeting was a two way learning curve, with both MEP's learning a great deal about the role of the meat hygiene inspector, the need for meat inspection, some of the challenges that MHI's face on day to day basis and the concerns that we have for the future. In return, we got to hear about how the European parliamentary system works, and in particular, how the system of regulatory change operates.

Neither of these two gentlemen appreciated what our job entails, a situation that I suspect is the norm. As two of the Association's objectives are to "promote, maintain and improve the status of meat inspectors", and to "promote and encourage meat inspection and hygiene and improving the standards thereof", I would venture to suggest that it would be a worthwhile exercise for the other

divisions to do likewise, and invite their local MEP's to one of their meetings.

Both Roger and Derek stated that this is the correct way to go about informing MEP's in general. Basically they have so many papers to read through that unless an issue, situation or organisation is brought specifically to their attention, then it is very likely to remain anonymous to them. Both of these gentlemen gave assurances that when issues pertaining to meat inspection are raised in the future that they would give it more personal time rather than simply relying on "experts" supplying them with facts and figures. They in turn thanked us for the offer of a professional opinion as and when they might need one.

AGM

Next year's AGM is to be held on Saturday 24th April, at the Aztec West Hotel, just north of Bristol and very near to the intersection of the M4 and M5. This is a venue that we have used before and proved to be excellent last time. Members wishing to attend are required to book their places by Friday 26th March.

FSA Proposed Change

The FSA continue to press ahead with their proposed change to Official Meat Controls, with official control shifting from inspection to verification.

We continue to argue the points that we believe that impartiality will be lost, standards will be diminished and that the proposed move to a more "risk based system" is little more than a pseudonym for "cost cutting", and that the consumer

will be subjected to a lesser protection. Figures taken from the FSA consultation document that the incidents of food poisoning were approximately 765,000 between 2000 and 2005. However, in 2006 there were signs that numbers may be back on the increase with overall cases estimated at 950,000”.

That this is exactly the time when the new regulations were introduced, and that these regulations were not perceived to be anything like as robust as the Meat Hygiene and Inspection regulations of 1995, is not viewed by the Association as a co-incidence.

The stated timescale for this change is to have the amended regulations in place for 2015, but the battle for us is now. We have had representation at all the stakeholder meetings up until this last meeting in November with Pierce Furlong in attendance. You can read his report further into this issue.

FVO Report

This past couple of weeks I have been reading, with great interest, the report by the Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) of the European Commission, on their visit to the UK in May of this year. If you should wish to read the report for yourself it can be found online. Go to the FVO homepage by typing in “europa food and veterinary office-introduction”, click on “inspection reports”, enter the report number 8225, then click on “report details”. On this final page click on the English version (en) and the report will be available to either open or save.

There are several points of interest in this report including 5.3.1;

“Most of the shortcomings found by the FVO team had not been identified by the CA. In some cases where the shortcomings had been identified and corrective action had been initiated by the

CA, the follow-up had been inadequate to ensure compliance by the FBO”.

And in the conclusion to 5.3.1;

“The control system in place did not guarantee that deficiencies, even those of a serious nature, are identified and effectively addressed to ensure FBO compliance with the general hygiene requirements”.

The Association has for a very long time expressed its concerns about the so called “light touch approach to enforcement”. It’s one thing to keep stating this but what can the MHI do in all practicality? We are all well aware that the OV in plant is the one person with the responsibility for initiating enforcement action, and the MHI is well placed to offer informal, verbal advice to plant staff as and when situations arise. But if a situation arises that shows no sign of being resolved as a result of such advice, or is serious enough to merit a more formal approach, I would encourage the MHI to inform the OV and to keep a record of having done so. I am aware that some OV’s do not like the MHI’s recording such details in plant daybooks, although they are there for all to have access to. So I would suggest keeping a separate record, so that an accurate record of events can be recalled if necessary. Our role is basically that of “eyes and ears of the OV”, which is ok as far as it goes, but, if the OV does not use this information then the MHI should be able to demonstrate that they have done their job as best they can with the limited tools available to them.

5.2.3;

“Very dirty sheep had been accepted for slaughter in one slaughterhouse visited. This could lead to a serious risk of contamination of the meat during slaughter”.

This very clearly underlines the fact the industry has not taken responsibility for the intake of clean livestock. If the plant could not get it right on the day of a major visit/audit like this one, it does make you think what the day to day standards might be like.

5.3.3; HACCP-based systems

“Although monitoring procedures had been established by the FBO’s, the monitoring was not in all cases properly carried out”.

No surprises here I guess. Many plants HACCP systems appear very good in the folders when you read them but if they remain on the shelf and the system is not implemented fully in the spirit that is necessary, then it remains a pointless exercise and a waste of time and money.

There are however one or two points that are directly relevant to the MHI;

5.4.3 Post-mortem inspection

The palpation of gastric and mesenteric lymph nodes of pigs did not take place in any of the slaughterhouses visited. The MHI was only visually inspecting the intestines from a distance.

In one slaughterhouse the hearts, although incised were not in all cases opened and visually inspected.

The second of these two points is, in my view, entirely un-necessary. I cannot think why any MHI, no matter the speed of the line, would not look into the ventricles of an incised heart.

However, with the first point, the non palpation of gastric and mesenteric lymph nodes, I can appreciate that high line speeds might preclude this from happening. Obviously there might well be faeces around in the gut tray as well as bile and urine, and it is not just the time taken to perform the actual inspection but

also the time to do the job hygienically and to wash hands and sterilize knives if incision has been necessary. If this is not happening as often as the report suggests, and it is down to the lack of staff or the lack of time for the MHI to perform the job in the hygienic manner required, then I would like to hear about it please. Drop me a line and I'll make sure that the powers that be are informed of the situation.

Farmers Weekly

A recent edition of Farmers Weekly carried a piece written by Professor Charles Milne, Director of the Food Standards Agency Scotland (FSAS), which called into question the value of meat inspection and even went so far as to suggest that the inspection of every carcass produced was not necessary.

This provoked an angry response from members who requested that the Association set out their point of view.

So I wrote a letter of response to the Farmers Weekly, that they duly published as “letter of the week” in the November 20th edition. Although I think my counter points were made, the letter was subjected somewhat to editing. If any member should wish to read my full response, please get in touch with your divisional secretary who will send you out a copy.

The Role of the Poultry Meat Inspector

A couple of editions back I wrote an article called “The Role of the Meat Inspector” which can now be found on the website; www.meatinspectors.co.uk

I have received some criticism for being too red meat orientated in my approach to this subject and I have to say that this criticism is spot on, and I'll take it squarely

on the chin. Although I am white meat qualified, I have not worked with poultry for a number of years now. I gave my assurances that I would review this article and set the record straight. However, having looked at it again I concluded that if I were to alter it in the manner suggested, it would lose the impetus that I was trying to impart to it. Therefore I reached the conclusion that a second article would be a better option, written by an inspector working with poultry and in a similar vein. This article would then be taken to council for review and the best one presented printed in the Hygienist with all due recognition and subsequently posted on the website for all the world to see. So come on those of you that thought (quite rightly) that I didn't represent your interests enough. Set pen to paper or your fingers to the keyboard, send your finished article to me personally and let's work to put things right.

This being the last edition for 2009, I would like to wish you all a very merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

Keep up the good work.

Regards,

Ian Robinson