

SW Livestock Board Update July 2020

The South West Livestock Board (the board) meets every few months to discuss topical issues, respond to consultation requests, identify challenges and opportunities for the sector across the South West and to ensure that views of members are fed up to our national board, via South West board chairman David Barton. To make this process as straightforward as possible, the board meets a week or two ahead of the national board to ensure that David has a clear mandate from members on a range of subjects.

Our last face to face meeting of the board was way back on the 2nd December 2019 with our scheduled March 2020 meeting becoming the first NFU south west meeting to be cancelled as a face to face event due to the worsening Covid-19 situation and impending threat of lockdown. We took the decision to hold a shorter virtual meeting – aiming for an hour over lunch time and have continued to hold short update calls and virtual meetings while under lockdown. Our March meeting focused on work that is being done to promote West Country Beef and West Country Lamb through the banner of the PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) – a designation that protects beef and lamb born, reared and finished with the six counties of the South West and fed on a forage based diet. It was very clear that a huge amount of progress had been made by AHDB to get West Country Beef and Lamb into supermarkets, on to pub menus and in canteen menus at universities to give just a few examples. However the board were concerned that not enough was being done to tell the industry about the PGI – it was felt that additional marketing resources might be needed as well as ensuring that a PGI update is added to any briefings or newsletters sent out to AHDB beef and lamb levy payers.

Board meetings are open to all members but we also encourage members to get in touch with their county representative on the board to raise issues on their behalf. These are farmers elected to the board to represent the members in their county and to provide their insight and experience to the board. If you are unsure who your representative on the board is, please contact the NFU regional office on 01392 440700 or south.west@nfu.org.uk or speak to your County Adviser.

As you will know, shortly after the March board meeting the country went into Covid-19 lockdown. As this happened, we decided to hold regular catch up calls and virtual meetings with board members to ensure that the challenges being felt at the farm gate could be passed on to our HQ and in turn fed in to politicians and policy makers. Board members highlighted the long slump in beef price that preceded Covid-19 and how this was being exacerbated in the early days of lockdown. Principally, we identified that consumers were displaying recessionary” buying behaviours, this was evidenced by a rise in sales of minced beef and lamb alongside a reduction in sales of higher value cuts. We were able to feed these concerns directly into NFU HQ and to policy makers and MPs. This pressure helped us to persuade supermarkets to agree to aid carcass balance by promoting more expensive cuts that were being overlooked while larger family gatherings weren't taking place (roasts, barbecues etc). This led to Morrisons being the first supermarket to actively promote such cuts, resulting in a boost in sales and a lot of good PR for Morrisons. Seeing this, other supermarkets began to follow suite. We also made sure that evidence from board members such as reduced price, difficulty buying inputs and farm equipment etc under lockdown fed into documents like the South

West NFU Covid-19 recovery plan: <https://www.nfuonline.com/about-us/our-offices/south-west/south-west-news/looking-to-a-world-after-covid-19/>

We hope that the “normal service” of face to face meetings will be able to happen again soon, but in the meantime, to ensure that the virtual meetings are manageable, the board meetings have been restricted to board members and invited speakers only. Our intention is to hold a more general “open” meeting of the board in Autumn/Winter so that anyone who is interested in finding out more about the work of the board can join in.

As we ease out of the initial “emergency” response phase of Covid-19, the board is aiming to focus on some of the key areas of work that were temporarily put to one side while the challenges presented by the pandemic were playing out. For our last board meeting (6th July 2020) we had hoped to visit the wonderful research farm facility at North Wyke near Okehampton jointly with the dairy board to learn more about the latest data from their Farm Platform and some research they are carrying out to look at the best possible ways to calculate farm carbon footprints – including the ability of different soil types to absorb and store carbon. This type of research work can help us all to become more efficient and to impact less on the environment. But crucially, it also enables us to give an accurate picture of our true carbon footprints of individual farms (or even fields!) when retailers, processors or anyone ask for that information. The board is also keen to see more efforts made to ensure transparency of price and deduction reporting in deadweight selling and to press government to mitigate the risks posed by Brexit and trade deals to farm standards as well as the impact of BPS phase out.