

Farm animal welfare is a "county lottery", report reveals

28/02/06

A major investigation into the enforcement of farm animal health, welfare and transport regulations has revealed more than 65,000 breaches of the regulations over 21 months and huge disparities in enforcement across counties in England and Wales.

The research report by the Badger Trust has used the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to assess how consistently farm animal health, welfare and transport regulations are being enforced in English and Welsh counties where there is a persistent problem with bovine tuberculosis (TB).

It reveals that the health and welfare of farm animals is a "county lottery", with livestock in some counties potentially receiving far less protection from the law than others. Limited enforcement activity in some counties also means that infectious disease controls, such as the pre-movement testing of cattle for TB, may prove to be ineffective.

The study exposes some alarming statistics. Between 1 January 2004 and 30 September 2005, farmers, hauliers, abattoirs and livestock markets in England and Wales breached farm animal health, welfare and transport regulations more than 65,000 times.

Ten prosecutions were launched every week in 2004 (526 prosecutions). In 2005, the number of prosecutions rose to 14 per week (534 prosecutions initiated in nine months). Fines for successful prosecutions are often paltry, but have been as high £101,000.

However, only a small number of the counties surveyed in this study regularly take legal action against those who breach the regulations. In England and Wales as a whole, the ratio of warnings to prosecutions is 57:1, with some local authorities not initiating any criminal proceedings at all during our survey period.

Prosecutions in England and Wales, in the nine months from 1 January 2005 to 30 September 2005, ranged from 1.7% of herds in Cornwall to 0% of herds in Derbyshire and Staffordshire. Whilst 1.7% might appear small, Cornwall contains 3,520 herds, resulting in 60 prosecutions.

Farmers in neighbouring counties may face widely differing levels of enforcement. For example, farmers who breach regulations in Cornwall are 15 times more likely to face prosecution than farmers in neighbouring Devon.

In the first nine months of 2005, in this study the top three counties for prosecutions as a percentage of cattle herds were Cornwall (1.7%), Gloucestershire (1.47%) and Somerset (1.15%). The three counties with least prosecutions as a percentage of cattle herds were Staffordshire (0%), Derbyshire (0%) and Shropshire (0.04%).

Trevor Lawson, spokesman for the Badger Trust, commented: "Trading Standards Officers will be in the front line of enforcing new rules for the pre-movement testing of cattle for TB. But this report shows huge inconsistencies which mean that this vital TB control measure might not be effective. Ministers must act promptly to ensure that all local authorities have adequate resources and clear guidance to enforce farm animal health, welfare and transport legislation consistently."

http://www.stackyard.com/news/2006/02/veterinary/10_farm_animal_welfare.html