



National Sheep Association

NSA policy position on farm assurance – *UNDER FURTHER REVIEW*

- NSA is committed to the principle of farm assurance and would like to see as few barriers as possible for sheep keepers to sign up and remain scheme members of Red Tractor Assurance in England, Farm Assured Welsh Livestock in Wales, QMS Cattle and Sheep Farm Assurance in Scotland, or Beef and Lamb Farm Quality Assurance in Northern Ireland. Additionally, NSA supports the principle of other farm certification schemes that relate to specialist consumer markets such as LEAS/RSPCA and organic.
- Farm assurance should be core industry foundation schemes that provide the option for farmers to give a declaration of legal compliance to guarantee food safety and animal welfare. Standards should reflect this foundation level and not be developed to suit consumer/retailer trends. There are alternative assurance schemes (for example higher welfare, environmental or PGI labelling) that provide niche options for farmers and retailers who wish to go above and beyond this foundation level, and farmers who opt for these should be paid accordingly.
- If farm assurance standards continue to go above a foundation scheme, which has arguably already happened in some parts of the UK, an additional foundation scheme should be developed to allow a 'broad and shallow' approach to get more sheep farmers into an assurance scheme.
- Implementation at farm level must be clearly and practically explained, using a common sense approach. Any changes to the standards must be developed in partnership with industry stakeholder groups, such as NSA, and then be communicated clearly, consistently and in good time. Any change made to the standards must be fully explained and an indication of the longer-term direction of travel of a scheme given. Industry stakeholder groups should be involved in communication of changes, but not as the primary source.
- While farm assurance logos are used as a marketing tool, this should not be used as justification for ratcheting up standards to create a point of difference for retailers. NSA believes that where retailers want a point of difference this can be integrated into the farm assurance inspection but clearly as a bolt-on, which producers are rewarded for, and not as part of the foundation scheme.
- NSA supports the use of 'spot checks' to ensure the integrity of farm assurance standards, but believes these unannounced checks should be targeted at farms considered to be at risk of non-compliance (and specifically at the area of risk on that farm) and that these farms should have 24 hours' notice, similar to the rules of an RPA inspection. The cost of these additional checks should be absorbed by the scheme administrator or the high-risk farms, rather than increasing across the board and penalising farmers who are not high risk. Exclusion of farms who do not meet legal requirements and/or foundation assurance standards is to the greater benefit of farm assurance schemes.

- Farm assurance inspections should be consistent, irrespective of the certification body used. Any checking of inspectors must be done in a way that causes the least disruption and cost (including time) for the farmers involved. While NSA appreciates checks on inspectors are necessary, any additional time required from scheme members to facilitate this should be compensated for. NSA believes inspections should not be entirely paper-based, as the condition of stock is the primary indicator of farm assurance standards. To this end, NSA supports a move to outcome-based assessments (where the result of a standard being in place is judged, rather than the actual standard) as a way to reduce checking of paper and records.
- NSA believes farm assurance should result in 'earned recognition' and appreciates some of the schemes/standards already result in a reduced risk of inspection from Government agencies. However, any new standards introduced to achieve additional earned recognition should only be accepted into a scheme if they come with firm reassurance that the result will be fewer inspections. Every effort should also be made to ensure any additional standards are not gold-plating legislation.
- The sheep sector is completely different to all other livestock sectors, with far greater diversity in production systems and a well-established tradition of trading animals between farms through an important stratified system. This provides the UK with a unique range of cultural, societal and environmental benefits that NSA believes should not be put at risk. Sheep born and reared on farms that have chosen not to be farm assured are not below standard, as these producers adhere to legal requirements or face penalties if, for example, RPA inspections show otherwise. In addition, sheep systems by their nature are outdoor, extensive, free-range and visible to the public. Farm assurance is specific to a minimum of the last 60 days of a sheep's life and offers increased food safety and quality information, as well as enhancing and supporting existing welfare and environmental legislation. NSA believes whole life assurance, as seen in other sectors, is not appropriate for the sheep sector. The market structure for the UK sheep industry is as diverse as its production systems, with export and ethnic markets playing a far greater role than in other sectors. Whole life assurance is not being demanded throughout the supply chain. and, where certain supply chains do require it, lamb that has spent the duration of its life on assured holdings could be identified, sourced and a premium paid by retailers and processors interested in doing so.

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