7. Sources of expertise and advice to farmers

Introduction

7.1 Farmers receive information on a multitude of topics from an array of bodies with differing interests, including MAFF, veterinary associations, farming associations, feed manufacturers, agricultural publications, and the media. Some farming witnesses made the point to the Inquiry that they received far more information than they had time to read or assimilate.

7.2 This chapter provides a brief description of the general advice networks available to farmers, and how they changed over the BSE period. The information conveyed to farmers about BSE, and its adequacy, is discussed in other volumes – in particular vol. 3: The Early Years, 1986–88.

Agriculture Departments

General advice and promotion programmes

7.3 Since the Second World War the UK’s Agriculture Departments have provided appropriate advice to farmers so that the efficiency of production systems could be improved on a national scale. In England and Wales a close relationship developed whereby MAFF, mainly through ADAS (and before 1971 its predecessor, the National Agricultural Advisory Service), advised farmers on good farming practice, and in turn, farmers approached ADAS when advice was needed.

7.4 At the time BSE emerged, MAFF operated an advice and promotion programme, through ADAS, to transfer the latest technology to farmers and growers, and to help improve the efficiency and competitiveness of agriculture. This programme covered animal health, agricultural efficiency, land management, and advice as required by statute.\[147\]

7.5 MAFF issued various publications providing advice to the industry. Most of these publications were based on work done by ADAS. For example, Codes of Practice provided farmers with guidelines to help them ensure their farming practices complied with relevant legislation,\[148\] while technical bulletins, circulars, information leaflets and booklets provided further help on a wide variety of topics relevant to farming.

\[147\] M23 tab 1
ADAS

7.6 ADAS was established in 1971 as an executive arm of MAFF. Its principal advisory function was to provide scientific, technical and business management advice to the agricultural and horticultural industries. The aim was to help farmers ‘develop technically efficient and financially sound farm businesses’. It had a network of offices throughout England and Wales, co-located usually with MAFF’s network of local offices.

7.7 ADAS also provided veterinary services and advice to farmers through the State Veterinary Service (SVS), which carried out a range of statutory functions for MAFF. The SVS comprised a network of Veterinary Investigation Centres (VICs), the Veterinary Field Service and laboratories. However, in 1990 the SVS moved out of ADAS and became part of MAFF’s Animal Health Group. Vol. 3: The Early Years, 1986–88 should be consulted for a brief description of the SVS’s regional structure, role, and interactions with local vets and farmers.

Review of ADAS

7.8 In 1984 Professor Ronald Bell, the Director-General of ADAS, was asked by the Minister of Agriculture to report on the future shape and direction of ADAS. In particular Professor Bell was asked to examine whether there was scope for passing on some or all of the cost of any ADAS service to the users rather than the taxpayer. His report to Ministers recommended that:

Wherever there is a clearly identifiable and substantial benefit to the customer Ministers may like to consider whether the customer should bear part or all of the cost of providing the services whether by direct charging or by general levy.

7.9 The Government accepted Professor Bell’s recommendation on charging and decided that farmers should contribute to the cost of providing ADAS services, apart from ‘public good’ advice on conservation, farm business diversification and animal welfare, which continued to be free of charge. From 30 March 1987 fees were introduced:

- the traditional advisory visit cost £28+VAT for a visit lasting up to one hour. Adjustments could be made for longer visits or for the advice of certain specialists;
- other services were offered on contract at negotiated prices, or through schemes designed to deal with specific livestock, land management, and business management needs; and
- two new subscriptions schemes became available:
  - for £50+VAT per year, basic advice by telephone was offered; and
  - for £150+VAT per year, up to four hours of on-farm advice would be added to the service provided under the £50 scheme.
7.10 Charged ADAS services extended to all areas of livestock management and associated business issues but, following the transfer of veterinary services out of ADAS in 1990, excluded veterinary advice.\textsuperscript{155}

7.11 At the time BSE emerged, ADAS’s communication methods with farmers included one-to-one consultancy on the farm, meetings with farmers’ groups, conferences, publications, radio and TV, and telephone and electronic information services. However, the introduction of consultancy services on a fee-paid basis in 1987 meant contracts were tailored to meet the needs of individual farmers,\textsuperscript{156} which reduced regular interaction with farmers who chose not to pay for services:

The number of conferences and farmers’ meetings declined and the volume of publications dropped sharply. There had previously been a very wide range of advisory leaflets and bulletins on specialised subjects, regular newsletters to farmers, research reviews and many other publications, some of which were free and others priced. The number of publications had begun to decline in the early 1980s, and with the introduction of fees many of the specialist leaflets and other publications ceased to be revised and eventually went out of print.\textsuperscript{157}

7.12 ADAS’s \textit{Divisional Bulletins}, which were compiled by ADAS’s divisional offices and sent by post to farmers on a monthly basis, were an important method of communication. Each administrative division had a different branded version, but they usually contained a variety of ‘awareness items’, mainly on technical matters, but also on policy and regulatory issues. When ADAS started to charge for its services, distribution of the bulletins continued, and they were used to promote ADAS’s services. All 22 bulletins ceased production in March 1992.\textsuperscript{158}

7.13 A survey of ADAS services conducted on behalf of the National Audit Office and ADAS in 1991 showed that 43 per cent of farmers who paid for chargeable advice used ADAS. Other sources of advice included accountants, vets and solicitors. About a third of the farmers who had sought free ‘public good’ advice used ADAS.\textsuperscript{159}

\section*{Local government}

7.14 Local authorities had a wide range of enforcement and monitoring duties under various pieces of legislation, many of which were relevant to farming operations (see vol. 14: \textit{Responsibilities for Human and Animal Health} for further details). They were consequently a source of advice on compliance with legislation.
National Farmers’ Union

7.15 The NFU represents the interests of farmers and growers in England and Wales. It has nine regional offices and local branches in each county. Membership is voluntary, and at March 1998 exceeded 130,000. This included more than 70 per cent of full-time farmers and growers, and 43,000 ‘countryside members’, who have an interest in rural land but are not dependent on farming for their livelihoods. It has no political affiliations, and is self-funding.\(^{160}\)

7.16 The NFU’s stated objective is to promote successful agriculture and horticulture, while ensuring the long-term viability of rural communities. It is involved in a range of rural affairs and collaborates with many other groups and organisations both within the UK and Europe and elsewhere to advance rural interests.\(^{161}\)

7.17 With a comprehensive branch structure throughout England, the NFU was well placed to help convey information on farming issues from government to farmers. This was especially true in relation to BSE, and vol. 3: The Early Years, 1986–88 and vol. 5: Animal Health, 1989–96 should be consulted for accounts of how government and the NFU worked together to convey information on BSE to farmers.

7.18 The Farmers’ Union of Wales (FUW) was formed in 1955 as a breakaway group from the NFU. The FUW was officially recognised in 1977, and has between 13,000 and 14,000 members.

Other membership organisations

7.19 The National Cattle Breeders’ Association (NCBA) is a representative body concerned with beef production. In 1991 the NCBA issued to members a Code of Practice for beef production. This detailed minimum acceptable standards, with sections on feeding, housing, health, transport and marketing, slaughter and meat handling, and general principles. It did not include any reference to BSE.\(^{162}\)

7.20 The Women’s Farming Union (WFU) is a non-profit organisation with branches throughout England, Wales and Scotland. It was founded in 1979. The WFU’s main goal is to link farmers and consumers by:

i. promoting demand for British farm produce;
ii. encouraging farmers and growers to practise better marketing;
iii. improving communication in the farming industry;
iv. ensuring that British produce is available and well promoted; and
v. lobbying against unfair competition and for measures which are in the positive interest of British consumers and producers.\(^{163}\)

\(^{160}\) T1 p. 25
\(^{161}\) T1 p. 25
\(^{162}\) YB81/04.18/7.1–7.4
\(^{163}\) S138 Berry and Smith para. 1
7.21 The *Country Landowners’ Association* (CLA) represents the interests of 50,000 members who collectively own approximately 60 per cent of rural land in England and Wales. Most members are involved in agriculture either as owner/occupiers, or owners with tenants.164

**Farming publications**

7.22 Commercial publications, and in particular specialist farming publications, have consistently provided an important and regular source of advice for farmers, information on current affairs and new issues, and articles on good farming practice.

164 S449 Bailey para. 1. Note: these are 1999 figures