Dairy Industry Debate

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to watch Sarah live

I will not repeat the powerful arguments that have been made by Thomas Docherty and my hon. Friend Neil Parish. I just want to ask the question: who cares for the people who actually feed the nation and care for our countryside?

In this House, we know that farming families are suffering. I used to be a GP in a very rural area, and I know that farmers work the longest hours and never seem to take a day off or take holidays. All of us are prone to depression—one in four of us will have it at some time in our lives—but it is particularly difficult and risky in farmers. Members may know that farmers are two and a half times more likely than the general population to die as a result of suicide.

In the week that the Government have launched their suicide strategy, I am very pleased that that has highlighted the especially high risk to farmers. We all have a responsibility to call on everyone to make it as easy as possible for farmers to come forward and talk about being in distress. Many people will be aware that farmers are particularly stoical—"they have a fine tradition of just getting on with it"—and we must make it clear that when they seek help, there will be people who are ready to take them seriously.

I draw the House's attention to the fact that help is out there. I ask the House to join me in paying tribute to the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, the Farm Crisis Network and the Addington Fund for the work that they do to support our farmers. I particularly draw attention to the report published in 2009 by the Farm Crisis Network entitled, "Stress and Loss". It highlighted the number of farmers who presented to the Farm Crisis Network with financial difficulties, depression and even family breakdown, for whom bovine TB was at the heart of those problems.

Other Members have mentioned the impact of TB on farming families, but over the next few months, we will see many people, particularly celebrities, queuing up to protect the badger. I would like them to be very careful about how they talk about farmers and farming families. We know that farmers and their families are at great risk from vandalism and direct action, and what people say can inflame such situations. I hope that all Members will join me in calling for them to act responsibly and to consider that there is another aspect to this debate.

We do not have enough time to go into a detailed critique of the problems of the randomised badger culling trial, but I want to make a few points relating to that debate. We cannot cure an infected badger through vaccination. We can no more cure an infected person with vaccination. Treatment takes months of complex antibiotic regimes, and everyone would agree that that is just not feasible in wildlife. Another point is that, in regard to protecting badgers themselves, TB is spreading remorselessly across the countryside to previously TB-free areas. In 1998, 599 cattle were slaughtered in Devon as a result of TB; by 2010, that had risen to 5,761. Perhaps an even more valid marker for spread is the number of new herd breakdowns, which rose from 191 in 1998 to 797 in 2010. That remorseless spread will continue across the countryside, so it is wholly appropriate for the Government at least to look at some of the issues raised by the randomised badger culling trial in relation to geographical areas,
edge effects and the length of time of the cull.

I actually support the move to have further field trials of vaccination, but we must be realistic. An oral live bait vaccine will not be available for some time, and it is not reasonable to extrapolate from the results of an injectable vaccine trial to an oral bait trial; they are not equivalent. In my view, it is perfectly reasonable to have a further trial that will consider such issues. Farmers themselves, and certainly I, will be the first to say, "Let's not carry on with it, if it isn't shown to be effective." Nobody is suggesting that vaccination should have a wide roll-out until we know whether it is starting to work.

I call on members of the wider community at least to consider the other side of this debate and the effect on farming families, and to join me in paying tribute to the people who, as I said at the start, actually feed the nation and care for our countryside.

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