

Window on Westminster

By Charles Nodder, the NGO's Political Consultant

NGO rejects Defra's cost-sharing proposals

THE NGO HAS REJECTED GOVERNMENT PLANS for 'sharing' the costs of animal disease management in England. Proposals that could see the introduction of a levy on every gamebird reared, together with compulsory insurance, were dubbed by the NGO a 'stealth tax'. In two meetings with Defra officials, and in a forthright official



written response to Government, the NGO has said the proposals are ill-thought out and should not be applied to gamebirds.

Defra's proposals were summarised in the last issue of *Keeping the Balance* and can be read in full on their website at www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/ahws/sharing/index.htm. Working this summer, in close collaboration with the Game Farmers' Association, the NGO has systematically exposed the Government proposals as a thinly-disguised and unjustified money-grab. The following extracts from our official response give a flavour of what we have been saying...

The NGO's overall position on Responsibility and Cost Sharing (RCS) is quite simple:

- We don't want it to be applied to the game industry.
- We have three main reasons for taking this position:

I. THE PROPOSALS WOULD INCREASE DISEASE RISK IN THE GAME SECTOR, NOT REDUCE IT.

The proposed new levy and insurance premiums implied by the consultation papers will make game chick production in the UK completely uneconomic, resulting in almost total reliance on imports, with consequent increased risks of exotic disease.

It is already very hard for a UK game rearer to make any money from game chick production. Profit margins are just a few pence per bird. Any levy or insurance related to game chick production would frankly finish it, driving all production overseas and increasing the movement of birds around Europe with consequent exotic disease risks. This would be wholly contrary to what we in the industry, the Government, FAWC, specialist vets and the poultry industry have all said should happen.

2. GAME REARERS ARE ALREADY PAYING THEIR WAY.

Game rearers already incur extensive costs in relation to disease prevention and cure. Their rearing systems are designed, built and run to reduce disease

risks. They pay large bills for medicated feed, preventive advice and veterinary treatment. They also bear the brunt of any market collapse in relation to notifiable disease outbreaks – usually without compensation. The game-rearing sector, uniquely among all the livestock groups, is already liable for business rates. These are unique and substantial taxes already affecting our entire industry.

3. THE PROPOSALS ARE UNFAIR.

Despite what EU law says, the playing field on which we operate is not level and we are facing up the slope. Imposing further costs on English game producers can only increase the incline, not just in relation to mainland Europe, but between the home nations of the United Kingdom. This in itself would be unfair.

As presently envisaged, a bird keeper would pay the same levy for a chick worth 60 pence as for a poult worth £3.50. That, too, is unfair. He would pay the same whether he owned the bird for 24 hours or for a year. It cannot be right. To make flat rate charges for all gamebirds irrespective of their value, time in ownership and based solely on gross profit margins in the very different poultry industry would be indefensible.

CONCLUSIONS:

Defra should either:

- a. Ditch the RCS idea altogether because the more detail emerges the clearer it becomes that RCS would be unfair, burdensome, and economically damaging for all the English livestock sectors;
- b. Take gamebirds out of the proposals for the unique reasons we have given – in particular that RCS would fuel imports and so be counter-productive to disease management, and that the game sector already pays business rates; or
- c. Make radical changes to the RCS proposals to render their application to the game sector fair, workable and positive in disease management terms. If this is the option taken, there will be a great deal more work to be done and we would want to be fully involved.

Our clear preference is for *a.* over *b.* over *c.*