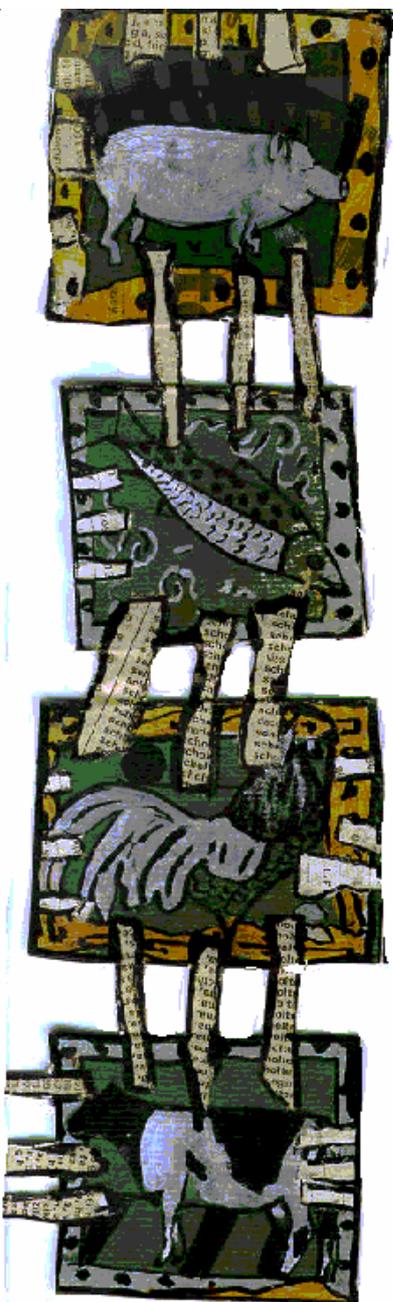


# Farm Animal Industrial Platform (FAIP)



## Sally Keeble

Farm Animals – Their Role in Society

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## **Farm animals – their role in society**

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I am grateful to be invited to speak to this conference on an important and complex subject. I will address the animal welfare implications of breeding regimes, and more especially of the impact of genetic modification in animal breeding. Furthermore, I will set out some of the particular challenges that are posed to these new developments by the consumer concern for animal welfare.

Your industry has to deal with some of the most difficult issues of our times – the role of science, the environment, international trade and development, ethical investment, and animal welfare. In the past two years stories about food and farming have never been far from the headlines in the UK. Recent newspaper reports of the Prince of Wales' views about GM food show that the combination of royalty and genetically modified (GM) food puts it right at the top of the news agenda.

Even without the royal interest, the issues surrounding developments in animal breeding are ones in which the public have a real stake. There is a pressing need for rational debate and good decision-making. Developments in your industry have the potential for real benefits to society, but with potential costs that some people find unacceptable. People need to think these through and take the decisions that will in some senses literally shape the future.

If the public were to accept some modern farming techniques and if subsidy systems were changed, we could have smaller areas of the countryside devoted to commercial agriculture, and more of it devoted to environmental and recreational purposes. But then people would have to accept more intensive farming techniques. People could have much cheaper food – but the price would probably have to be a decline in animal welfare standards, more imports from developing countries, possibly a reduction in food standards, and almost certainly a profound change in agriculture and by extension the rural landscapes we all enjoy – certainly in the UK.

### **Behind the public anxiety**

Many of these issues are already upon us in the current debate about GM crops. The debate about GM animals has, in comparison, barely begun. Yet the science has been around a long time. The Polkinghorne committee, set up by the UK government in July 1989, was charged with looking into the implications of the emerging science. It concluded in one of its reports that “ethical concerns over genetic modification and animal welfare are not different in nature from those raised by modern breeding and farming methods generally”.

This statement is an inaccurate assessment of the public's perception. It might be correct from the scientific point of view, in that most of the things that can be done with modern techniques of genetic modification could be done, albeit on a more protracted basis, by traditional selective breeding. Indeed,

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some of the most profound animal welfare issues are raised by methods of animal rearing rather than breeding. However, the furore that exists around GM crops illustrates the danger of misjudging, or under-valuing, public anxiety over the development of biotechnology and its application to food production.

What is behind this public anxiety? It may sometimes be dismissed as prejudice, or social values, and judged irrational. But both farmers and politicians ignore these factors at their peril.

Firstly there is the high concern about animal welfare in UK, which has already been responsible for the unilateral introduction of animal welfare standards.

The second major pre-occupation is food safety, especially heightened by the BSE disaster. I suspect that the UK have a higher level of concern than many other nations, and certainly than the US. On a select committee visit to Washington we were all shocked to hear about the animal welfare implications of the use of hormones in beef production - as well as the food safety implications. We also saw some standards of food production that would not be tolerated in a major factory in Britain.

The third major concern shaping public policy in this area is the demand for cheap food. People in Europe have become used to supplies of high quality exotic food year round at prices that are often *unsustainable*.

### **Citizen's concern and consumer purchases**

The source of the real problem for farmers lies in the contradiction between citizen's concern and consumer behaviour. Because there is not the evidence that consumers are prepared to pay for the higher welfare standards, nor necessarily for the safer food, that we say we want. Among the papers being delivered at this conference is one that has information about public attitudes towards free range eggs and other produce, showing that people do not understand the labelling and demonstrating some contradictory attitudes towards their decision-making when they buy food (Arie van Genderen and Huib de Vriend). There is real conflict between the different strands in public opinion, and the views of different sections of the community.

However, this does not deny the need to deal with the views of those in the animal welfare or food safety lobby. The former in particular are extremely adept shapers of public opinion, in many ways acting as gatekeepers to public approval. If the industry is to ensure that it retains the public's confidence over the longer term, it is essential that it is seen to deal in a substantial way with the animal welfare and food safety lobbies and not to be in conflict with them. In the UK, the Government's decision to set up the new Food Standards Agency and two new commissions to look at the human and agricultural and environmental aspects of the GM will provide a public arena in which these issues can be properly discussed, and also where "best science" can be established. This is particularly important for the farm animal breeding organisations, given the public antipathy that has been evident thus far towards 'big farmers' and biotechnology.

## **Welfare and ethical concerns**

Much of the public is remarkably ill-informed about the implications even of existing “traditional” farming methods. I certainly was before spending time in the past two years visiting farms. We do not know that some cattle have been bred for meat production to an extent that they often require caesarians in order to give birth; that even with the new regulations in place for pig farming, sows give birth conditions that some of us did not know existed; and that chickens have been bred so that they reach their optimum weight in a matter of weeks. If the public saw some of these, and other practices, they would demand higher, not lower, animal welfare standards.

However, these animal welfare concerns associated with “traditional” farming methods are likely to be overshadowed by the debate about the welfare implications of genetic modification of farm animals. The concern about “unnaturalness” raised in connection with GM crops can only increase in relation to animals. Mucking about with plants is one thing – mucking about with animals is going to be much less acceptable. This was recognised in the Polkinghorne report as being a concern that must be addressed. It referred to “a degree of unease about the unnaturalness of the process”, a “moral taint” related to the nature of the technology. The report did not conclude that this was enough to ban genetic modification of animals for food production. This idea of unnaturalness can also be seen as springing largely from a mistrust of science. Although not a scientist, I do not share the mistrust, and find it quite difficult to appreciate. For example, as is shown in a paper to this conference, people are prepared to accept GM of animals for production of medicine but not food, which is really quite illogical. There is also a degree of hostility to animal husbandry techniques which are applied with relatively little controversy to reproductive medicine for human beings.

A further consideration in this issue of “unnaturalness” is the transfer of genes between species. These are in part animal welfare concerns, in part more general ethical issues that the farming industry will need to address. What does it do to the intrinsic nature of an animal if it includes genes from other species, and especially if it includes human genes? One of my colleagues who was a research scientist before entering parliament will explain at great length that transferring a gene is only copying a formula. However, this explanation may not be readily acceptable to the public. Arguments over transgenic animals may make the present row about “Frankenstein” vegetables pale into insignificance. One of the original drivers behind the decision to look at regulation of GM animals was the production in the late 1980s of a sheep modified to carry a human protein involved in blood clotting. I sometimes wonder whether the public is aware that this is even possible.

Another welfare concern about genetic modification of farm animals is likely to be the concern about the impact of rapid accentuation of specific traits. This is already a major source of objection by the animal welfare lobby to selective breeding techniques currently used in farming. In parliamentary debates about welfare of laying hens, broiler chickens and pigs, the concerns focus on intensive rearing methods. But much of it is also concerned with the selective breeding of animals for traits which make for cheap efficient food production, but which run counter to the welfare of the animals concerned.

There are also ethical and animal welfare concerns about the particular traits that are selected. For example, there is discussion in the literature of the production of cows milk that is like human milk. This will no doubt have excellent medical applications. What the implications are for the cow when feeding its

own calves, assuming that was to be permitted in any event, is another matter. Equally, how human mothers will respond to one of their functions being usurped in quite such dramatic fashion is also likely to be problematic.

Equally there is discussion about the development of poultry which are non-aggressive, to avoid beak trimming. Whilst this might be a perfectly valid way to breed poultry and might also be seen as a solution to the animal welfare lobby's objection to beak clipping, the more obvious solution might be to have different management systems.

Finally all these developments can only be made on the basis of experimentation, and therefore also with some failed experimentation. There are animal welfare issues in whether it is justifiable to carry out these experiments if they cause unnecessary hardship to the animals for no benefit, certainly to the animals, and possibly not to human beings either.

## **Discussion**

What does all of this mean for your industry? And not just your industry. The debate around these issues will involve Government in almost as much controversy as it will involve you. Firstly it requires transparency in what is happening. It is astonishing to see, how far the science had advanced in 1989, when the Polkinghorne report was written, and how little has been done, since then, to inform the public about the scientific processes, and the potential which it holds. It is a tragedy that the debate about GM crops has been media rather than science driven. On the more sensitive issue of genetic modification of animals, we will need a much more informed public debate. Much of the debate about genetic modification of animals has focussed on cloning and on Dolly. The somewhat comical treatment of her ageing problem – mutton dressed up as lamb etc – has not ensured that the public are properly informed about the really complex scientific and welfare issues involved.

Secondly we will need an early and careful labelling system. One of the particularly damaging aspects of the GM crop argument is that the four GM foods were on the market before there was a labelling system in place to ensure that consumers could exercise choice. This seriously undermined efforts to win public acceptability for these foodstuffs. It has been argued that GM meat will only need to be labelled where it contains transgenic material, especially from human beings. However, I suspect public opinion will demand something more exhaustive than this. The industry is best placed to produce a labelling that is the GM equivalent of Freedom Food. And there needs to be agreement on what is a non-modified animal, the issue of segregation that has so bedevilled the debate about GM crops. The public may expect non GM to mean zero. Possibly some of the groundwork for this has been done through the traceability systems put in place for cattle in the wake of BSE. One of the issues the Polkinghorne committee raised was the need for traceability from animal breeders right through the industry to the final consumer.

Most of all, though, it means the farming industry ensuring that its practises are acceptable to the wider public opinion on animal welfare, recognising the increasing role that animal welfare is likely to have in public policy decisions.

Government acts as a point of reference in society. Regulator of industry, supporter of industry, protector of public health, upholder of values of society, regulator of internal trade, and increasingly, of

European and world trade. But Government cannot make people eat certain foodstuffs or force them to accept particular farming practices and in this sense Government can not solve the farming industry's problems. To achieve that will involve the active engagement of the scientific community, the farming community, and the general public. Winning over public confidence is a project for which the farming industry is in some ways well placed. Over the past two years one of the more interesting mobilisers of public opinion in the UK has been the Keep Britain Farming campaign run by the National Farmers Union. It is perhaps easy to overlook that one. The Farmers Union held rallies and lobbies in my constituency and took farm animals into the town's shopping centre. All the evidence I had from people in my wholly urban constituency was that they were profoundly concerned about rural landscape issues, foreign competition issues and food production and safety. It demonstrated to me that there is no reason to have dislocation between food producers and food consumers. Overcoming that divide will best serve the interests of both consumers and your industry.

