

February 2009

Thank you for your letter concerning the proposed EU system for the Electronic Identification (EID) of sheep.

Please be assured that Conservatives in the European Parliament are completely opposed to the compulsory introduction of EID on 31 December 2009. It was the European Commission along with some member states that felt that the foot-and-mouth disease epidemic in 2001 highlighted the need to establish specific traceability systems for sheep. Council Regulation (EC) No 21/2004 of 17 December 2003, which the UK supported, established a system for the identification and registration of sheep and goats.

My Conservative colleague and Agriculture spokesperson, Neil Parish MEP, chairman of the European Parliament's Agriculture Committee, has been leading the fight against EID and individual recording. To be quite frank, MEPS powers are limited when it comes to blocking legislation agreed upon by the governments of each EU member state. Nevertheless, Mr Parish is using all means possible to put pressure on the Commission to make this legislation voluntary. In November he invited the Agricultural Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel to the UK to hear the concerns of sheep farmers over this matter. Last week he held a hearing in the European Parliament, inviting speakers from across Europe to express their concerns to the European Commission. All the points you make were voiced strongly by the NFU and NSA as well as by speakers from the Netherlands and Germany. I have attached the resolution which was handed to those in attendance and will be signed by MEPS - this will be the basis for a letter which will be sent to Commissioner Vassiliou, who is in charge of pushing through this legislation. Mr Parish has also extended an invitation to Commission experts to visit some sheep farms in Scotland, in order to get the message across that EID is unworkable in practice

Conservatives encourage effective and reliable traceability in the livestock sector. Nonetheless, we do not believe that it was due to lack of traceability that the Foot and Mouth epidemic was exacerbated in 2001, this was due more to the lack of urgency in enforcing movement restrictions. Enforcing this system upon our farmers will most probably result in worse traceability, an argument that Conservatives in the European Parliament have raised time and time again. Furthermore, it comes at a huge cost to farmers who simply cannot afford this equipment and as you rightly point out, when these tags are ripped out, this raises concerns over animal welfare. Please be assured that we will continue to fight against this legislation as well as pointing out the many benefits of the manual batch recording we have now in the UK.

It is ludicrous to implement legislation which will threaten the sustainability of the UK and the EU's sheep sector and the environmental benefits it provides. We risk moving production out of Europe and importing from countries which do not have the effective and reliable traceability systems that we already have in place. First and foremost, Conservatives in the European Parliament believe that EID and individual recording should be implemented voluntarily by Member States. Unfortunately the UK government is going ahead with planning the implementation of EID and drawing up plans for derogations.

I am very grateful for your letter and please be assured that Conservatives in the European Parliament will carry on fighting against the compulsory implementation of this technology and will continue to put pressure on the European Commission and the UK government to change their position on this issue.

Giles Chichester MEP