Government seeks views on reducing livestock methane production

The UK Government has today launched a UK-wide call for evidence asking agricultural industry, scientists and the wider public for information on the use of new types of animal feed products that can reduce methane emissions from livestock.

Ruminant livestock – cows and sheep – are the leading cause of farm greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, feed products with methane inhibiting properties have shown potential in reducing reduce GHG emissions, especially from housed cattle. These products may include ingredients like methane production inhibitors, seaweeds, essential oils, organic acids, probiotics, and antimicrobials.

The consultation has been launched in agreement with the Devolved Administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The governments are seeking to find out how farmers and agri-businesses can increase adoption of this technology to support more sustainable protein production. It will consider the current role of feed additives within our farming systems, and the potential barriers that could prevent the introduction of methane suppressing feed products in both the near and long-term future.

In 2019, agriculture accounted for 10% of total UK greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, with methane accounting for approximately 54% of agricultural emissions. The UK Government has set an ambitious target to achieve net-zero GHG emissions across the whole UK economy by 2050. To meet this target all sectors must reduce their GHG emissions.

Agricultural greenhouse gas emissions have reduced by 16% since 1990 (as of 2020) thanks to innovation and advances in technology, with many farms using more efficient agricultural practices. Government emissions and production statistics suggest that since 1990 we are producing a litre of milk with 21% less GHG emissions. Efficiency gains in dairy farming mean that we are now producing 11% more milk than we were in 2000 with 24% fewer cows.

Farming Minister, Victoria Prentis said:

“We’ve set out ambitious targets to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and it’s right to consider how we can help farmers produce food sustainably and reduce emissions from agriculture further.

“Well managed livestock can provide various environmental benefits and meat and dairy can both be an important part of a balanced diet. Through this call for evidence we’ll better understand the promising role emerging feed additive technologies for cattle could play and how government can help drive its development.”

Minister for Rural Affairs Lesley Griffiths said:

“We need to develop a resilient and prosperous agriculture sector which reduces its carbon emissions and greenhouse gases through a range of approaches including the possibility of adoption of important technologies. We want to work with our farmers and industry to achieve this and I encourage everyone involved in the industry in Wales to respond to the call for evidence.”

Scotland’s Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, Mairi Gougeon, said:

“The Scottish Government has ambitious climate change targets and, to meet them, agriculture in Scotland needs to reduce its emissions by 31% from 2019 levels by 2032. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas and therefore methane reducing feed additives have the potential to be a crucial part of the solutions that the agriculture sector needs to deploy towards achieving our climate ambitions.

“That is why I welcome this four nations effort to improve our understanding of the use of this innovative new technology in the sector, which will inform each government’s approach to future policy-making in this area. I would encourage the Scottish farming community to respond to the call for evidence and make their views known.”

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister Edwin Poots MLA said:

“Following my consultation on future agricultural policy for Northern Ireland earlier this year, I announced that the use of feed additives to reduce enteric methane emissions, nitrogen and phosphorus outputs would be progressed by collaborative industry research. This UK wide call for evidence will provide further guidance to guide us along the path to reduced methane emissions from our livestock industry.”

While food choices can have an impact on greenhouse gas emissions, well managed livestock also provide environmental benefits such as supporting biodiversity, protecting the character of the countryside and generating important income for rural communities.

A robust approval process is adopted for these products and takes into consideration the health and welfare of the animals, food safety and implications for human health and the wider environmental impact of these products.

On 27 June 2019, the UK became the first major economy in the world to set a legally binding target to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions from across the whole UK economy by 2050. The UK was also amongst the first signatories of the Global Methane Pledge launched at COP26, aiming to reduce global methane emissions by at least 30% by 2030, against 2020 levels.

As part of the effort to achieve our net zero ambitions, the UK Government

and the Devolved Governments are considering a wide range of measures to reduce emissions from our agricultural sectors. The use of feed additives and other animal feed with methane suppressing properties have been shown to potentially reduce methane emissions, especially from dairy and beef cattle, and is one such measure being explored.