

With all those profits...Do retailers care about animal science?

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Supermarkets – Do they really care?

The last 20 years have seen the meteoric rise of the multiple retailers and supermarkets in UK food retailing, to a position of their dominance in the food retail market place. Over the same period of time, livestock farmers and in particular producers of meat and milk have been challenged with abolition of quotas, reductions in direct subsidies, animal health challenges such as BSE and FMD, and rising costs of production, all of which have put pressure on farm gate prices and the viability of many farming businesses.

Rationalisation has happened in all the livestock sectors. In the dairy industry, three dairy farmers are still giving up every day. Suckler cow, ewe and sow numbers have all fallen, average herd and flock sizes have grown and production from individual animals has also risen. This increased efficiency in UK livestock agriculture has undoubtedly been driven by the prices farmers receive for their products and certainly hastened by supermarket buying strategies.

In all this, it is easy to think that supermarkets have little regard for animals and in the supporting science that generates the improved health, welfare and production traits, that generates the efficiencies that they demand. However, quite the contrary exists.

Supermarkets have grown their businesses by listening to their consumers and farm animal health is an area that consumers often feel passionate about.

This consumer concern has led most major supermarkets to adopt specific contracts, schemes and direct supply chains where excellence in animal health and welfare is paramount to their purchasing requirements. In each case, the application of the latest developments in animal science has been required by the supermarkets buying contract or promoted by the retailer. Recent examples include risk management strategies for reducing lameness in dairy cows, or vaccination schemes to reduce disease in neonatal calves.

Retailers clearly understand the benefits of healthy livestock in not only helping them generate healthy profits, but also to re-assure their customers of their provenance in delivering food of animal origin, from high welfare systems. A healthy animal science industry therefore is a key part of the current and future role of supermarkets in meat and milk retailing in the UK.