

Dame Deirdre Hutton  
Chair, Food Standards Agency  
Aviation House  
125 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6NH

27 November 2008

Dear Dame Deirdre,

### **SURVEILLANCE OF CATTLE FOR BSE**

I know that Katrina Williams has written to Tim Smith about Defra's policy on future surveillance of cattle for BSE and that Defra has published its "Report on Current and Future Surveillance for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy".

For its part, SEAC has recently examined two risk assessments, one prepared by the VLA, the other by EFSA, which looked at the consequences of changing the age at which cattle are tested for BSE. SEAC was satisfied that these risk assessments were sound, both in terms of the analysis and the data and assumptions upon which they were based. SEAC's conclusions were communicated to the FSA Board on 15 October and can be seen on our website at [www.seac.gov.uk/papers/101-summary.pdf](http://www.seac.gov.uk/papers/101-summary.pdf).

In respect of risk assessments such as these, surveillance is essential to provide estimates of the incidence and prevalence of BSE in the cattle population, a point reflected in SEAC's conclusions on the risk assessments. It is implicit in those conclusions that SEAC is satisfied that the information provided by the UK's current surveillance demonstrates that the current prevalence of BSE in the UK herd is so low as to present minimal risk to human health. SEAC has expressed its clear view that the continuing decline in the BSE epidemic is attributable to the effect of the ruminant and reinforced feed bans.

However, ongoing surveillance is the only means of monitoring future changes in the incidence and prevalence of BSE, the effectiveness of control measures in preventing an epidemic, and the possible emergence of new prion diseases. Ongoing surveillance therefore provides vital information on the future disease status of the cattle population. SEAC has already stated that the current approaches to risk assessment based on results from current surveillance are scientifically sound. It is

for risk managers to decide what level of surveillance in the future best delivers the information they need, and a considerable body of work exists that bears on the matters risk managers need to take account of to determine that level of surveillance, as summarised in Defra's recent Report. SEAC stands ready to assess the validity of any new risk assessments used to inform such decisions.

I am happy to discuss these matters further if you wish.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Higgins", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

**Prof. Chris Higgins**  
**Chair of SEAC**