

FAnGR News

Newsletter of the Farm Animal Genetic Resources Committee

Issue 5, August 2011

Introduction

Welcome to the fifth Newsletter in this series. This newsletter is the first from the newly constituted Farm Animal Genetics Resources (FAnGR) Committee. As explained in the last Newsletter, the UK Government reported on its review of 'Arms Length Bodies' in October 2010, and announced that the National Standing Committee on FAnGR would be reclassified as a Departmental Expert Committee (rather than a Non-Departmental Public Body) with effect from April 2011. Our terms of reference differ slightly from the previous committee, though the primary objective is to advise UK Government and Devolved Administrations on FAnGR issues – full terms of reference can be found on our website at: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/fangr/>. Committee membership also differs – again, a full list can be found on the website.

The committee held its first meeting on 30 June 2011 in London. At this meeting it was agreed that priority activities for the next three years would include:

- **Providing advice to sponsoring departments on FAnGR issues.** This will include ongoing work on identification and monitoring and conservation and sustainable use of FAnGR.
- **Improving access to electronic data on livestock populations to assist in monitoring risk status, and to automate reporting of livestock Biodiversity Indicators.**
- **Redoubling efforts to 'mainstream' FAnGR issues –**

this is especially relevant given the recently agreed Target 13 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Strategic Plan for 2011 – 2020. The target is that 'by 2020, the genetic diversity of cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and of wild relatives, including other socio-economically as well as culturally valuable species, is maintained, and strategies have been developed and implemented for minimizing genetic erosion and safeguarding their genetic diversity'. It is also timely given that the UK and Devolved Administrations are currently writing Biodiversity Strategies. The new England Biodiversity Strategy 2011-2020 is due to be published by Defra imminently.

- **Recommending research priorities relevant to FAnGR and providing advice on commissioning and delivery.** Priorities will include projects: (i) on the costs and benefits of FAnGR to the rural economy and (ii) to develop a co-ordinated *in situ* and *ex situ* National FAnGR Conservation Strategy for breeds at risk, and mainstream breeds that qualify for priority action, taking into account the conservation work already being carried out by NGOs and breed societies.

- **Enhancing engagement with key stakeholders, especially breeders and their organisations, and policy makers.** This includes further enhancing communications with Animal Health policy and operational teams in UK Government and Devolved Administrations to ensure appropriate input to legislation affecting FAnGR.

To help in these tasks, we plan to form three new working groups of the committee replacing the current four groups:

- **Monitoring and Conservation** – covering identification, monitoring, conservation and sustainable use of FAnGR.
- **Technical** – covering research and development issues and technical advice in response to consultations etc.
- **Communications** – covering communications, education and engagement with stakeholders

As always, we welcome comments and suggestions on the Committee's work, via the Secretariat.

Sadly, I have to report that Frances Radcliffe, who has led the Secretariat for the current and former FAnGR committees, left Defra earlier this month. Also, Caithriona Porter will be moving from her post as FAnGR Manager in September to a new role in Defra. Frances and Caithriona have provided excellent support and expert advice to the committee and will be greatly missed – we wish them both well.

The following sections give updates on work of the committee and its predecessor over the last 6 months.

Prof Geoff Simm
Chair

Progress in implementing Recommended Actions in the National Action Plan

A brief update on the work of the current subgroups of the committee is given below.

Please visit our website for more information on the FAnGR committee and its work, for an update on progress on Recommended Actions in the UK National Action Plan on FAnGR, and links to other sites of FAnGR interest: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/fangr/>

Education and Communication

The FAnGR Committee continues to be proactive in working with Industry, Government and Advisory bodies. A letter has been sent to the European Commission on Bovine Tuberculosis vaccination policy with regard to rare breeds. There has been correspondence with RBST and the NSA with regard to the Sheep Semen Archive. The committee has been in communication with several breed societies regarding their population size and risk status. A paper on the Definition of a Breed has been posted on the FAnGR website, and we plan to add a paper on estimating population sizes and a Beef Industry Structure report to the website shortly. We are planning meetings with the Defra Minister and Chief Scientific Adviser in the near future to discuss the role, remit and activities of the FAnGR Committee.

Research and Development

The subgroup has provided support to sponsors in evaluating completed research projects that had been commissioned to meet recommendations in the National Action Plan. Members of the Research and Development subgroup have been working closely with those in IMC and CSU on a range of issues. In particular, discussions have been held with members of the CAMERAS (Coordinated Agenda on Marine, Environmental and Rural Affairs Sciences) partnership in Scotland on the inclusion of Farm Animal Genetic Resources in the National Biodiversity Network database.

Over the next three years, the proposed Technical subgroup will focus on Research and Development, the provision of technical advice and responding to consultations. The Technical subgroup will also be actively involved in identifying key research priorities for FAnGR.

Identification, Monitoring and Characterisation

One of the pressing needs identified by the Committee is for a system for estimating the numbers of individuals in breeds that are below or close to thresholds for action. These thresholds may trigger access to agri-environment funds, or opportunities for protection in the midst of an epidemic, or other conservation actions. Such a system has to be simple and cheap to operate. The Identification and Monitoring subgroup has plans for establishing such a system but these need to be implemented. In the meantime questions are raised over the qualification of particular breeds for particular schemes and it is difficult for breed societies to give full answers as they, in turn, depend on the responses from their members. Therefore, the Identification and Monitoring subgroup has explored what procedures are needed to provide good estimates of population numbers based on incomplete information. In some cases, the outcomes are double edged where qualification for agri-environment schemes is concerned. If a breed has thrived and increased in popularity - a success story in conservation - it may have reached the point where it ceases to qualify for the scheme support payments. Withdrawal of the support may then threaten its profitability, and potentially reverse the trend in popularity, and perhaps return the breed to being 'at risk'. Such a potential 'yo-yo' effect is inherent when using

scheme support funding as a conservation tool, nevertheless such schemes do provide effective safety nets for the conservation of many of our UK native livestock breeds.

Conservation and Sustainable Use

The work of establishing definitive lists of all UK native, non-native and 'at risk' breeds for cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, equines, fowls, ducks, geese and turkeys has continued and is nearing completion with recent joint meetings between a CSU sub-committee member and specialist waterfowl and other poultry bodies.



Photo by: Paddy Zakaria "Carn Bhren Herd" Shetland Cattle, North West Scottish Highlands.

Close liaison has been established with other organisations to coordinate better genetic biodiversity strategies in agricultural environments. Crucially, the role of FAnGR as a key component of overall UK Biodiversity, via its core position in Agricultural Genetic Diversity, is [at last] gaining substantial recognition.

Input on FAnGR has been made to the consultations on the forthcoming CAP reform which has raised the profile of the relevant issues ahead of the new policy being determined.

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