

Agriculture Bill

Written evidence submitted by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust to the House of Commons Public Bill Committee on the Agriculture Bill 2017-19

November 2018

Introduction

This is a response from the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST). Between 1900 and 1973, the United Kingdom lost 26 of its native breeds of livestock. RBST was established in 1973 to arrest this extinction, with its charitable objects as "...the preservation of breeds and breeding groups of domestic livestock of importance in the promotion of agriculture being breeds at risk, and having characteristics worthy of preservation in the interest of zoological research and education to ensure the preservation of genes of special or potential value in hybridisation and other work" and "To conduct carry out and promote research". The RBST is the sole national organisation which monitors, saves and promotes native breeds of livestock.

- It monitors numbers of animals by collating and publishing an endangered breeds Watchlist.
- It saves animals by the collection of germinal products, sperm, ova, embryos, and freezing them in the UK National Livestock Gene Bank.
- It promotes the use of native breeds of livestock for food, fibre, conservation and utility.

Executive summary

The UK's native breeds reflect the landscapes, soils and traditions of its people. From place-names to surnames, the UK's rural heritage is inextricably linked with the breeds that have supported rural communities for hundreds of years.

The UK has an unparalleled biodiversity of native breeds of livestock, with over 30 native breeds of cattle, of which over a third are at risk of extinction, and over 60 native breeds of sheep, around half of which are at risk. All 11 of the UK native breeds of pigs are at risk, as are around 100 native breeds of chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys¹.

This submission requests that increased consideration be given to native breeds, as their biodiversity has the potential to be an important national resource for developing UK agriculture and food.

Suggested amendment

To insert into to the Agriculture Bill in Clause 1 on the "Secretary of State's powers to give financial assistance" an additional purpose:

(h) protecting or improving the genetic diversity of livestock and plants

Explanation for amendment

To recognise that native breeds are an important genetic resource which should be more widely utilised and recognised. The wider economic, environmental, biodiversity and heritage public benefit

¹ RBST Watchlist 2018

of UK native breeds is as important as compared to historic buildings and landscapes, or other natural capital and genetic resources from wildlife or flora².

The Convention on Biological Diversity Strategic Plan Target 13 states “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 minimising genetic erosion and safeguarding their genetic diversity.” This also reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 2.5 and Interlake Declaration on Animal Genetic Resources.

Both the RBST’s own Watchlist and the UN’s FAO Domestic Animal Diversity Information System confirm that these goals are not being met in the UK. This is neglect of a national resource for developing sustainable UK agriculture and food production.

Evidence submitted by Dr Nigel Maxted on plant diversity to the Agriculture Bill Committee, also argues that ‘genetic diversity is essential’³ for plants and; we believe that this is just as much the case for livestock. Both plant genetic resources and our native breeds of farm livestock genetic resources are under threat, and both are inextricably linked. If we do not give increased recognition and use of both, we risk not meeting the challenges of the future with regard to climate change and food security. Farming Minister George Eustice stated at the meeting of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on Wednesday 31 October, ‘pasture-fed livestock systems, actively supporting grazing livestock...can have a positive impact on both animal welfare, but also on public health and also farm environment’⁴. We need native breeds of livestock to utilise these pastures.

Moreover, cultural heritage now extends beyond the traditional concepts of heritage as being strongly linked to physical landmarks such as monuments, buildings, and urban structures. This recognition of native breeds as cultural heritage, and of non-material values and knowledge systems as “intangible heritage” is reflected in the importance given to native breeds by their areas of origin⁵. Marsoner, in his 2017 paper on indigenous livestock breeds as indicators of cultural ecosystem services, states; “Livestock breeds are a living document of one of the greatest cultural achievement⁶.

These traditional native breeds are more than a living history and symbols of the UK’s national farming heritage; their biodiversity has the potential to be an important national resource for developing UK agriculture and food⁷.

For more information, please visit <https://www.rbst.org.uk/rbst-consultation-responses>

² <https://www.rbst.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=1503929e-f9e3-4b6a-a058-fe77e9b6af6b>

³ Written evidence submitted by Dr Nigel Maxted, University of Birmingham
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmpublic/Agriculture/memo/AB50.htm>

⁴ <https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/daeba288-0fac-45a5-b992-40f990ce9da5>

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1296207410000361>

⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1470160X17303886#bib0110>

⁷ <https://www.rbst.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=1503929e-f9e3-4b6a-a058-fe77e9b6af6b>