

Red Tractor: new chairman aims to advance the cause

Stewart Houston CBE has made a vast and unequalled contribution to the UK pig industry. His experience as a pig unit manager and pig producer enabled him to progress to become an effective chair of the British Pig Executive, an AHDB board member and executive director of the National Pig Association.

His knowledge and commitment to British food production served the pig industry well when he was a non-executive director of the Food Standards Agency.

He is also a non-executive member of Defra's Health and Welfare Board advising ministers on the delivery of animal health and welfare policy.

In 2019 Mr Houston became pig committee chair and board director of the pig sector of Red Tractor. In August 2019 Red Tractor reviewed membership of the reassurance schemes to improve its consistency and rigour.



Stewart Houston aims to help deliver a robust scheme that not only the UK but also global consumers trust and which is regarded with pride by pig farmers. *Paul Smith* put searching questions to the new man in the pig chair at Red Tractor.

What motivated you to take on this new important role?

I've been a great advocate of assurance since the days of Assured British Pigs and saw this as an opportunity to play a part in furthering the cause of assurance, with increased emphasis on compliance. There's a great team at RT, doing a difficult job well, and our ambition is to make RT the go-to audit and producers proud to be members.

What are the key responsibilities of the pig sector chairman and its board members?

Standard setting, compliance and a responsibility to represent the views of producers, processors and retailers in delivering those standards so that shoppers have confidence in our products. We also use our experience to help the marketing team get the best out of a relatively small budget.

Pig people tend to be averse to form filling. Does Red Tractor membership create more 'red-tape' or reduce it?

Reducing the audit time burden on farmers has always been a key objective of RT. Recently we rolled out an online Compliance Portal, essentially an online filing cabinet where producers can upload and store the documents required for their RT audit. This means that each time they have an audit they only need to upload updated documents where required and everything else is already there from the last visit. The other good thing about the Portal is that assessors can check the paperwork before the visit so that on the day of the assessment less time is spent in the farm office and more time can be spent looking around the farm and at the pigs.

Is there any evidence that Red Tractor endorsement is understood by consumers and does it actually influence buying behaviour?

Whilst there has always been good recognition of the RT logo amongst shoppers, the marketing team have been working hard over the last couple of years to improve shopper understanding of what the RT logo means. Following our most recent campaign, including a Red Tractor TV advert, consumer research shows that awareness is at an all-time high, with 75% of primary shoppers able to name the RT logo when presented with a selection of assurance logos, up by 2.7 million shoppers in the last 18 months. Sixty nine per cent of shoppers also indicated their purchasing decisions are positively influenced by the RT logo.

Does Red Tractor membership help open doors in the export market and does it support those already committed to exporting?

I know from my time working on exports to China and other eastern markets, as well as spending time on the BPEX stand at European events, that independent auditing of our robust standards played a key role in delivering export certification and orders. Exports now make up around a third of the UK pig price and we hope to help exporters build on this success.

Considering the prevalence of African Swine Fever in several European countries, are current Red Tractor biosecurity standards fit for purpose or are they now in need of further revision?

We are currently reviewing the RT Pigs standards and proposed changes will go out for consultation at the end of 2020, to be implemented from October 2021. Some new biosecurity standards have been proposed, including a requirement that dead-stock collection must be done outside the perimeter of the farm biosecure area and a requirement that staff must not keep their own pigs off site. A new standard is also proposed for outdoor pig units, requiring them to implement a Wild Animal Control Plan aimed at minimising access of wild animals to the pigs. The biggest risk of incursion of ASF into the British pig herd is through a pig gaining access to contaminated pig meat and therefore it is incumbent on all pig keepers (including non-RT pig farmers) to ensure they are doing everything they can to minimise the chance of that happening. All RT pig producers are required to have a biosecurity plan in place, and it's up to them to ensure that the plan is actively followed and doesn't just sit on a shelf gathering dust.

What action is taken to safeguard the Red Tractor brand when a member fails to comply and bad press arises?

We have great standards, but bad press affects consumer confidence in our products and 'good' producers tell me they are angry with the 'bad' producers who bring the good name of the whole sector into disrepute, which is why we've increased the emphasis on compliance. We have a range of sanctions we can apply, including suspension and the withdrawal of membership, but it's about more than the RT brand, it's about thinking of yourself as a food producer, being aware of the needs of the shopper and pushing for compliance 365 days of the year, not just on inspection day.

Consumer demands necessitate that production systems provide permanent environmental enrichment. How is this being monitored?

This is not only a consumer requirement, but a legal one. During the audit assessors will check to ensure that all pigs have access to enrichment and a non-conformance will be raised if any pens are not up to the mark.

Regarding maximum stocking density rules for outdoor sows, it's a 'one size fits all' approach. Is this realistic in view of soil type, local rainfall levels and seasonal variations?

Don't forget, RT outlines the maximum number of pigs in a given space, which producers mustn't exceed, but equally they can reduce the stocking density depending on local conditions.

Rationalisation within the UK pig processing sector necessitates that many pigs have to be transported long distances prior to slaughter. Furthermore, the UK pig breeding sector operates within a global marketplace. How does Red Tractor monitor long distance transport and are there concerns about more stringent controls in the future?

We are aware that Defra plans to hold another public consultation on the welfare of animals during transport (not just pigs) and we will pay close attention to the outcomes. In the meantime, RT is plugged into the industry's Pig H&W Council and it's Welfare Sub-Group and our livestock transport standards ensure that RT pigs are transported in vehicles which are fit for purpose and are handled by competent operators. Our standards don't cover exported breeding pigs, but there is legislation in place to ensure their welfare.



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