Written evidence from George Holmes (MET0005)

Introduction

I am a dairy farmer in Dorset farming 1000 milking cows and 500 young stock on 1000ha. I have recently completed a Masters in Business Administration with distinction at Bournemouth University and owned and managed a dairy farm business for over 35 years. My business is following regenerative principles, aiming to reduce our carbon footprint and operate with the highest welfare standards.

Submission

Given my expertise is in practical cattle agriculture I am responding to questions 11 and 16 to 20 and to the impact on cattle.

11) Whilst GWP* has the huge benefit of effectively recognising the biogenic cycle of methane by ruminants, I understand that in its current form it also risks understating the impact of other very important forms of methane release (such as a fossil fuel leak) as any decrease is treated as a negative submission even if a lower level of methane still continues to leak.

16) There are emerging technologies in feed additives to reduce enteric methane from cattle however the only licensed product (Bovear) has to be fed on a continuous basis, therefore in it's current form is incompatible with being fed in any situation except where the animal is fed a total mixed ration (TMR) which limits its use, particularly in grazed animals. In theory reduced methane emissions could result in more efficient use of energy by cattle, however there is no evidence that Bovear provides this benefit. Therefore, the cost of it's use will result in an increase in the cost of food to the consumer unless it's use is subsidised in some other way.

Slurry management systems may offer potential to recover methane and use it as fuel (therefore converting it to carbon dioxide), however currently the cost appears to outweigh the financial benefit therefore either costing the food consumer or requiring subsidy.

Breeding offers the potential to gradually achieve a reduction in enteric methane production, however if breeding goals were switched to that target, other genetic gains could be slower, again potentially reducing gains in farm productivity.

17) The take up of slurry infrastructure grants has been hindered and almost totally prevented by long delays in granting planning permission by local authorities. The inflexibility of the grant standards has also led to those awarded grants not choosing to take the offer further.

18) It must be understood that methane produced by ruminants is part of a biogenic cycle (UC Davis 2020) and totally different to methane from fossil fuels which is new to the atmosphere whereas biogenic methane produced by ruminants is derived from atmospheric methane.

There is a very high risk that the wrong choices could lead to reducing cattle production in the UK, if consumption continued at the current level the replacement cattle products are likely to be imported from less productive cattle areas where enteric methane release per kg of dairy or meat is much higher.

19) This is very difficult since ruminants are a very important part of regenerative farming practices and important to build soil carbon in grazing systems. Farmers are measuring dramatic increases in soil carbon using regenerative farming techniques and some are now claiming that they are effectively carbon net zero because of the carbon sequestration they are achieving. Removing ruminants from these systems would make this unobtainable.

20) As previously mentioned, the wrong policy could dramatically reduce dairy and beef production in the UK reducing our food security.

References

University of California Davis 2020. Why methane from cattle warms the climate differently than CO2 from fossil fuels. *Clear center, Clarity and Leadership for Environmental Awareness and Research at UC Davis.* Available at: https://clear.ucdavis.edu/explainers/why-methane-cattle-warms-climate-differently-co2-fossil-fuels