

SCOTLAND LAUNCHES EMERGENCY SHEEP WELFARE SCHEME

The Scottish Government today launched its scheme to avert an animal welfare catastrophe on Scotland's hills.

Around 250,000 light lambs which should have already been slaughtered and shipped to European markets now face starvation because of the onset of winter and of a lack of grazing. The export markets for which these sheep are bred have been closed for most of the past two months and these markets will only reopen, subject to conditions, on Friday (October 12).

Light lambs are usually roasted whole in Europe and there is scant domestic demand.

Under the scheme, farmers will be paid £15 per animal which will then go to abattoirs for humane slaughter. Some carcasses will be rendered allowing use of skins and fat for biodiesel and the remainder will be incinerated. They will not enter the human food chain.

The scheme is estimated to cost between £5 million and £6 million, depending on uptake levels.

Richard Lochhead, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, said:

"The foot and mouth crisis has left hundreds of thousands of sheep stranded on our hills facing starvation and it is quite clear that we have to act now to prevent any more suffering. We are already getting isolated reports of lambs dying. We cannot countenance the prospect of this continuing given the impact not only on the welfare of the animals but also on those farmers who would otherwise face watching their flocks starve to death.

"Scotland is facing this problem earlier than other parts of the UK because our grazing cycle is one month ahead. The Scottish Government strongly believes the moral and financial responsibility for this crisis lies with the UK Government. It should bear the costs of this scheme but action is needed now and we will provide funding on an emergency interim basis and seek to recover this from Defra in due course."

"We have developed this scheme in consultation with farmers, vets and animal welfare organisations and have made direct approaches in Brussels to the Commission to speed the process up.

"Time is of the essence. There may be opportunities for some of these lambs to be exported from October 12 but any delay in implementing the scheme will simply cause more suffering to these sheep.

"We will monitor its progress and uptake over coming weeks and keep options under review."

Charles Milne, Chief Veterinary Officer for Scotland, said:

"It is clear that a real welfare problem is emerging. This scheme is essential to prevent a catastrophe of animal suffering on a large scale.

"All animals entering the scheme would have been slaughtered and their meat exported. However, with the lack of availability of this market we must ensure that welfare of these animals is not compromised."

Mike Flynn, Chief Superintendent for the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, said:

"The policy of the Scottish SPCA is to oppose the culling of animals unless there is a clear animal health or welfare issue.

"The current Foot and Mouth restriction has resulted in some 250,000 light lambs in the remote regions of Scotland, losing their market within the traditional livestock calendar. Through no fault of Scottish farmers, these light lambs are already competing for poor grazing or being fed diminishing supplementary feeding that was in place to feed what was expected to be next year's livestock production.

"There are already reports of livestock mortalities in these regions, and if the situation remains it will put these light lambs at severe risk of starving to death.

"The Scottish SPCA therefore fully supports the proposed sheep welfare scheme, and offers the Scottish Government any aid to ensure that the aim of the scheme is transparent and met. "

Notes to editors:

1. Light lambs represent less than 10 per cent of Scotland's lamb crop - they are traditionally exported to Mediterranean countries and these markets were lost during the initial export ban. These lambs rely on grazing, and now that autumn is upon us many are losing condition and becoming unsaleable as food. The scheme aims to head off welfare problems for these lambs and protect grazings for stock which have to overwinter in the hills and produce next year's lambs. Failure to do this will simply increase potential welfare problems for other animals.
2. The scheme is entirely voluntary. Farmers will still be able to keep their lambs for food or for fattening if they feel that is an option.
3. The scheme is aimed at light lambs (i.e. those under 25kg liveweight). The scheme will operate for a maximum period of 10 weeks. Producers transport their lambs to collection centres located throughout Scotland, where they will be bought at £15 per head. The collection centres will be responsible for arranging transportation of the animals to abattoirs.
4. More information on the scheme can be found on:
www.scotland.gov.uk/sheepwelfarescheme

Contact: Chris Holme 0131 244 2614 or 07810 507009

Scottish Crofting Foundation

Lochalsh Business Park

Auchtertyre

By Kyle of lochalsh

IV40 8EG

Tel 01599 566365

Fax 01599 566375