

Appraisal of the Impact of Multiple Retailers Quality Assurance Schemes on the Environment

As a result primarily, of customer and other market pressures, the large multiple retailers in the UK have introduced Quality Assurance Schemes (QAS) for an increasing number of their food products. This has now extended to the formation of a European group (EUREP) representing 26 of the major retailers. One of the key areas being promoted by the retailers is the improved animal welfare achieved by their QAS, and the fact that livestock supplied through these schemes are produced under less intensive conditions than conventional systems. This may be partly responsible for the increased number of "outdoor pig" herds. Although this meets the animal welfare concerns, there have been negative impacts on the environment, and water quality in particular, in a number of locations.

Other schemes are from the outset designed to reduce the amount of agrochemicals such as pesticides being used in crop production, which should provide environmental benefits. There are also an increasing number of assurance schemes being developed by single producers or representative bodies.

The Agency commissioned a small team from Risk & Policy Analysts Limited (RPA) and Entec UK Limited (Entec) to examine the current status of Quality / Farm Assurance Schemes.

Whilst the Agency is currently remote from any direct involvement with QAS, it has been noted, with interest, that there is an increasing environmental component being incorporated into some schemes. In order to have a better understanding of these schemes the R&D Technical Report P162 examines the range of QAS, and identifies:-

- the schemes that are in existence;
- who "owns" the schemes;
- which multiple retailers use which schemes;
- which QAS requirements seem to be directed at environmental objectives;
- how these translate into farming practice;
- any QAS requirements that may affect the environment indirectly; and
- whether any of these requirements might benefit from Environment Agency input so as to either maximise the environmental benefits or minimise the potential for any (unintentional) adverse impacts.

The report identifies that some schemes are attempting to address environmental concerns by linking scheme requirements to the MAFF Codes of Good Agricultural Practice. Integrated Crop Management (ICM) is promoted in some protocols, though many of the references to environmental good practice are very broad at present and leave substantial room for adjustment.

The initial interest in involving the Agency more closely in the development of the schemes is varied. However, as there are general moves towards including more environmental requirements and combining schemes, there may be a real opportunity for the Agency to influence and harness some of their undoubtable potency.

This R&D Technical Summary PS161 relates to information from R&D Project P2-077 in the following output:

R&D Technical Report P162 "An Appraisal of the Impact of Multiple Retailers Quality Assurance Schemes on the Environment"

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Project Manager: Steve Woods (South West) June 1998

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It should be noted that this report is restricted externally due to the commercial confidentiality of the subject matter. Copies of R&D Technical Report P162 are available internally from the Regional Information Centre (Library) and from the Water Research Council Information Resources, Frankland Road, Blagrove, Swindon, Wiltshire SN5 8YF (Tel: 01793 511711 Fax: 01793 514562).

© Environment Agency
Rio House
Waterside Drive
Aztec West
Almondsbury
Bristol
BS32 4UD

Tel: 01454 624400
Fax: 01454 624409