



BCVA Policy Statement

Sustainability in Farm Animal Practice

Revised version 2026 (shortened)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Farming does more than put food on the table. It manages the soil, water, nutrient cycles and biodiversity that our countryside depends on, and UK farmers are the custodians of all of it. Cattle vets sit right in the middle of that picture: we work alongside farmers to protect animal health and welfare, and in doing so we support public health too, in line with One Health thinking.

Sustainability, properly understood, has to be judged across the whole farm and the whole food system. Greenhouse gas emissions matter, but so do animal welfare, food production, nutrient density, biodiversity, soil health and water resilience. Reduce sustainability to a single carbon number and you risk missing most of what actually makes a farm sustainable.

BCVA recognises there is a widening gap between the sustainability targets being set and what is realistically deliverable on farms, and that the Net Zero debate itself has become more contested since we last wrote this policy. Progress from here depends less on headline commitments and more on credible, evidence-based change at farm level, change that supports animal health, welfare, productivity and food security rather than existing only on paper.

Environmental impact varies hugely between systems and management approaches, and judging farms purely on greenhouse-gas metrics can miss real gains elsewhere: in biodiversity, nutrient cycling, soil function, water management and carbon sequestration. Agricultural policy needs to weigh all of this, or we risk trading natural capital for cheap food that is not sustainable at all.

UK dairy and beef will remain central to the national diet, and BCVA believes that, given the right regulatory and economic conditions, farmers will find sustainable solutions that suit their own circumstances; there is no single blueprint. Improved animal health and welfare, efficiency gains, agroecology, regenerative and agroforestry approaches, sensible land-use change, better nutrient cycling and renewable energy will all play a part, and grazing livestock have a genuine role in nutrient cycling and biodiversity that should not be overlooked. What must not change is the primacy of food production and animal welfare. Producing food less efficiently here, or outsourcing it to countries with weaker standards, does not solve the problem, it just moves it, and often makes it worse.

Farm vets are well placed to help navigate this. We are trusted, we are used to weighing up complex and competing pressures, and we can bring that judgement to bear on sustainability just as we do on disease control, welfare and productivity.

Policy Development - Updated Context

A lot has changed since we published the original policy in 2021. The science has moved on: the IPCC's Sixth Assessment confirmed that 1.1°C of warming is already locked in, and updated UK accounting has revised agriculture's share of national emissions up to around 12%, even as the average UK carbon footprint per person has fallen. The policy landscape has moved too, with the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway and Environmental Land Management Schemes now running as live schemes rather than concepts, a UK ruminant antibiotic stewardship roadmap under way, and BVA's own parasiticide policy published in 2025.

The Net Zero conversation itself has shifted character. Back in 2021, "net zero by 2050" was largely accepted as the primary target to aim for. That is no longer straightforward: there is a growing and legitimate debate about the gap between sustainability targets and what is actually deliverable on farms, and this policy tries to speak to that complexity rather than assume everyone is still signed up to chasing carbon reduction alone. At the same time, our understanding of what "sustainable" means has broadened well beyond carbon accounting, to include nutrient density, soil health, water resilience, biodiversity, people, and welfare, now assessed through the Five Domains Model rather than the Five Freedoms alone, because carbon metrics on their own have repeatedly been shown to miss or misrepresent what is really happening on farm, particularly in regenerative and pasture-based systems.

The underlying principles have not changed: animal health and welfare still come first, food security still matters, and GHG metrics on their own are still not enough to judge a farm by. What has changed is the detail, and the tone needed to reflect where the debate now sits.

Acknowledgements

The original 2021 policy was shaped by member consultation and the commitment of the BCVA Board and Sustainability Working Group, with particular thanks to Rachel Hayton. This 2026 update has been led by Rob Howe, Chair of the Working Group, with valued input from colleagues across BCVA Board, BVA and Vet Sustain and the many members who gave their time and expertise along the way.

Seven Policy Priorities

1. THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF VETS

Vets sit at the heart of the food chain. We provide preventive care and treatment, carry out surveillance, promote biosecurity and welfare, and safeguard public health, including protection against zoonotic disease and antimicrobial resistance. That gives the profession real influence over how sustainably livestock systems are run, without ever losing sight of the fact that animal health and welfare come first.

Welfare itself has moved on. Alongside the Five Freedoms, BCVA now recognises the Five Domains Model, which looks beyond the prevention of suffering to behavioural opportunity, mental state and quality of life. A sustainable system has to offer more than an absence of harm, it should give animals a life worth living, and that is as much an ethical component of sustainability as an economic or environmental one.

There is a public health dimension too. Around three-quarters of emerging animal diseases can pass to humans, so our role in zoonotic surveillance, antimicrobial stewardship and food safety carries real weight.

Efficiency matters as much as anything else we do. Endemic disease alone accounts for a fifth of global production losses, and diseases like Johne's, BVD, mastitis and lameness quietly inflate a farm's carbon footprint long before you even measure it. Improving fertility, genetics, housing and biosecurity, and getting nutrition right, particularly around pasture use, slurry management and protein feeding, all reduce environmental impact while improving the bottom line. UK livestock emissions have fallen over the last twenty years as cattle numbers have dropped and productivity has risen, and vets have been central to that, through disease control as much as efficiency gains.

BCVA will ...

- Promote the role of the vet from farm to fork and in One Health.
- Support cattle vets to improve efficiency through better disease control, biosecurity, nutrition, fertility, genetics, housing and technology.
- Support vets to develop expertise in national disease control strategies, including training in BVD, Johne's disease, lameness, mastitis and TB control.

2. IMPACT OF DISEASE AND KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Many of the diseases we deal with every day, bovine TB, BVD, Johne's, mastitis, lameness, respiratory disease, are 'iceberg' diseases: the clinical cases you see are only a fraction of the real cost. If we can account for that cost properly, we can also account for its carbon footprint, both at farm level and per unit of output. The same goes for key performance indicators like fertility, longevity, yield and growth rate; improving them is not just good husbandry, it reduces environmental impact too.

Changing subsidy structures give us a real opportunity here. Schemes like England's Animal Health and Welfare Pathway are starting to prioritise the diseases that carry the biggest welfare, productivity and emissions cost, and similar schemes are developing across the UK. BCVA backs vet involvement in these schemes, provided they come with realistic lead-in times and clear expected outcomes, so that farmers and vets can plan around them rather than scramble to comply.

BCVA will ...

- Continue to engage with the Animal Health and Welfare Pathway and equivalent schemes across all devolved nations to keep sustainability and welfare high on the agenda.
- Work with partners including the National Johne's Management Plan and CHeCS to build the evidence base on disease control's GHG benefits at farm level.
- Call for legislative review to coordinate disease control across the devolved nations.

3. ENGAGEMENT, TRAINING, DEVELOPMENT AND COLLABORATION

Every farm vet should be able to talk confidently about sustainability, whether that is a conversation with a client at the crush side, a discussion within the practice, or BCVA's own policy work nationally. Public debate on farming and climate change has become polarised, and vets have a genuine role to play in keeping that conversation evidence-based and finding common ground.

BCVA will keep identifying gaps in CPD provision and filling them where it can, whether that is regenerative agriculture, or working out the sustainability impact of different feeding strategies. Programmes like Farm Vet Champions and the UK ruminant antibiotic stewardship roadmap, launched at BCVA Congress in 2025, show what is possible when we collaborate with industry partners rather than working in isolation.

BCVA will ...

- Use CPD and Congress to bridge the gap between sustainability research and what actually works on farm.
- Build on Integrated Parasite Management training as a practical example of how sustainability, welfare and

medicine stewardship reinforce each other.

- Support engagement with regenerative approaches to farming, through training and links to relevant organisations.
- Continue collaborating on initiatives such as the Veterinary Sustainability Roundtable, of which BCVA is a founding member.

4. NET ZERO IN A FAIR REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Net zero means human activity causing no further increase in global temperatures, through net zero carbon dioxide emissions and enough of a cut in methane to stop additional warming. BCVA backs that ambition and believes UK livestock systems can get there, working alongside industry bodies and advisors, individually and collectively. We continue to support the Net Zero targets set by NFU and NFU Scotland.

There is no single blueprint for getting there, and there should not be. What matters is that every farm can accurately assess its own footprint using an agreed, fair methodology, one that properly accounts for rented land, herd expansion and reliance on bought-in feed. Accurate footprinting is increasingly becoming a condition of funding, from government and banks alike, so this is not optional for much longer.

None of this should come at any cost. BCVA would not support mitigating emissions by sacrificing welfare, soil health or productivity, and warming mitigation has to sit within whole-farm sustainability, covering welfare, biodiversity, soil, water and social and economic factors too. It is also worth being blunt about a loophole in the UK's own Net Zero commitment: it excludes imported goods, aviation and shipping. That makes it entirely possible, on paper, to hit the target by exporting our food production to countries with a worse environmental record. That would be a false victory, and it would hollow out our own industry in the process.

BCVA will ...

- Continue to work with industry towards Net Zero.
- Continue to promote a level playing field for UK agriculture.

5. BIOSECURITY & FARMER ENGAGEMENT

GWP100 has long been the standard way of comparing greenhouse gases against carbon dioxide, but it does not tell the full story for methane, which breaks down in the atmosphere after around twelve years. GWP* better reflects methane's real warming effect: a sustained decline in agricultural methane of around 0.35% a year is enough to stop further warming from that source altogether, and a 5% annual decline could start reversing the additional warming caused since the 1980s. BCVA strongly supports GWP* as the right way to assess warming from ruminant systems, and the case for taking methane reduction seriously, quickly, is stronger than it is often given credit for.

Carbon and sustainability tools are being used more than ever at farm level, often at processors' insistence, and while they can genuinely support decision-making, results need to be read with care. Methodological limits and data uncertainty are real, especially where farms are trying to evidence genuine progress on soil carbon, biodiversity or nutrient cycling under regenerative management. These tools should help farmers improve, not be wielded as a blunt compliance stick, and biodiversity and soil health, in particular, still lack reliable, workable ways of being measured.

We are also concerned about the push to cut UK methane emissions by 30% by 2030. Without a direct way of measuring methane from ruminants, the only lever left is often a straight cut in animal numbers, and that risks simply shifting production, and its emissions, overseas with no net benefit to the planet. There is a better story to tell: UK milk's carbon footprint is under half the global average, and UK beef sits well below the global average too. When we talk about the environmental cost of British beef and dairy, we should be using British figures, not global ones that do not reflect how we farm here.

BCVA will ...

- Support the use of GWP* to more accurately reflect methane's warming impact from ruminants.
- Promote UK-specific figures when discussing the GHG footprint of UK produce, and fair, like-for-like comparisons between food sources.
- Support agreement on robust methodologies for assessing biodiversity and soil health.

6. RESPONSIBLE USE OF VETERINARY MEDICINAL PRODUCTS

Climate change is likely to alter disease pressure on UK livestock, which makes responsible use of veterinary medicines, particularly antimicrobials and parasiticides, more important, not less. This policy sits alongside BVA's call for responsible, evidence-based parasiticide use, and BCVA is currently updating its own parasite control policy, first published in 2021, to reflect where Integrated Parasite Management and the evidence base now stand.

Our food standards are among the best in the world, but there is more to do: reducing the need for antimicrobials and anthelmintics through better husbandry, targeted vaccination, and a clearer understanding of what drives resistance and environmental residues. Some parasiticides affect non-target species too, dung fauna and wider nutrient cycling among

them, so responsible use is not just about resistance, it is about the wider ecosystem as well.

Getting this right means justifying every treatment on welfare grounds while avoiding the unnecessary use that drives resistance, wastes product through withdrawal periods, and risks environmental contamination. Integrated Parasite Management gives us a practical framework for balancing all of that, and vaccination will only become a bigger part of the answer as we go.

BCVA will ...

- Promote responsible, proportionate use of veterinary medicines as part of farm-level health planning, prevention, and a strong vet-farmer partnership.
- Support stewardship programmes and benchmarking that reduce resistance risk and unintended environmental impact.
- Promote sustainable parasite control through Integrated Parasite Management, working with VMD, RUMA, AMTRA and others to keep the message consistent and science-based.

7. PROMOTING SUSTAINABILITY WITHIN OUR PRACTICES

Sustainability starts at home. BCVA backs the Vet Sustain Greener Veterinary Practice Checklist, which sets out practical ways for practices to become more environmentally responsible, from resource use to team engagement, and the Vet Sustain '6 Ws' framework, Wildlife, Welfare, Warming, Wellbeing, Waste and Water, gives teams a straightforward way to think about sustainability across the whole business, not just its carbon footprint.

We would like to see more practices appoint a Sustainability Champion, someone who can identify practical opportunities, from transport and equipment to waste and single-use plastics and help embed sustainability into the practice's everyday values rather than treating it as a side project.

BCVA will ...

- Signpost members to the Greener Veterinary Practice Checklist, the 6 Ws framework and other resources for farm animal practice.
- Encourage practices to sign up to the SME Climate Hub, Investors in the Environment, or similar initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Farm animal vets have a genuine part to play in sustainable food production, and with the right support we can make a real contribution to UK farming's route towards net zero. That starts close to home, in our own practices and with our own clients, through good health planning, responsible antimicrobial and parasiticide use, and sound breeding, rearing and disease control. The measures we back need to work at farm level, be genuinely achievable, and never compromise animal health or welfare to hit a target.

Done well, sustainable livestock systems deliver far more than food: better welfare, biodiversity, soil health, nutrient cycling, water resilience and climate resilience, often from the same intervention. A hedge, a diverse sward, a healthy grazing system, these things do several jobs at once, and that is worth remembering when the debate gets reduced to a single number.

The Centre for Innovation Excellence in Livestock's 2020 report on Net Zero Carbon and UK Livestock showed that UK ruminant emissions already compare well against global averages for similar systems. There is more to do, but the direction of travel, driven by efficiency, disease control and high welfare standards, is one farm vets will recognise and welcome.

BCVA will keep using its position to support members, work constructively with industry and policy partners, and push for a sustainability agenda that is scientifically credible, practically deliverable, and rooted in animal health, welfare and food security. Above all, we are committed to a level playing field, one where raising standards at home does not simply export our environmental footprint, and our farmers, overseas.