

Press release – June 8th 2016

Over 1000 sheep killed by dogs this year: Action need NOW

SheepWatchUK has now recorded 930 dog attacks on sheep since January 2016 and with many of those in lamb the number of deaths tops 1000, and with significant underreporting of dog attacks on livestock, the number is likely to be much higher. Records demonstrate that any breed of dog can be involved and attacks are occurring right across the country at any time of the day, but surprisingly to many 55% of all attacks take place with no owner present, suggesting that it is dogs escaping from gardens and those running loose that play a large part in the problem, exceeding those that simply need to be placed on a lead whilst out walking near sheep.

With the issue gaining a higher profile and many people calling for a change SheepWatchUK brought together a conference of key partners to look at the issues and find some steps forward. Dog groups were very keen to be part of the discussions as the vast majority of dog owners are very responsible and are equally upset by the attacks and the Kennel Club gave a presentation enforcing the need to be responsible by keeping back gardens secure. Others attending also included: representatives from the farming world (including the National Farmers Union [NFU] ; the National Sheep Association [NSA]); government (Defra's Animal Health and Welfare Board for England); and law enforcement (including representatives from several police forces).

'It was a very constructive conference' said Terena Plowright from SheepWatchUK 'I was delighted that instead of just talking about it, there have been steps agreed across all partners that may make significant changes to this desperate situation'.

Key messages that came out of the conference are:

- Of the 930 sheep that were killed many were in lamb so the figure could be doubled
- Farmers are failing to report incidences, and without the recorded crime, funding and support cannot be channeled into Rural Policing, so things will not change
- Farmers must report ANY attacks *or* worrying, be very clear when reporting that this is a crime, and ask for an incident number – they must report.
- There is no requirement from the Home Office for police forces to record the number of dog attacks on sheep – so no national figures and this needs to change
- There was a call for all police forces to take livestock worrying more seriously and best practice to be rolled out countrywide
- The laws may already exist to protect sheep but these need fully assessing – this will be taken forward with the Police and Government
- If the laws exist then better police training and implementation are essential. If the laws do not exist, then change is needed.

- Dogs attacking sheep is a symptom of a minority of irresponsible dog owners allowing their dogs to stray or not properly securing their property, resulting in their dogs escaping, which is part of a wider issue of dog welfare.
- Education across the country is key to people acting responsibly with their dogs

Professor Timothy Morris from the Animal Health and Welfare Board advising DEFRA explained *'This meeting was essential to allow everyone to fully understand the issues surrounding this problem. DEFRA want to protect the welfare of sheep and dogs, and support the farming community. To do this we need to work across government, with the Police and people that understand the issues and this conference has helped us all take a step forward'*.

The conference included a talk from Stephen Jenkinson from the Kennel Club who explained that spaces for dog walking are being squeezed out by housing development and this often pushes walkers onto farmland *'We need to include dog walking space as part of the planning process'* said Steve, *'People want to let their dog have a run off the lead but we need to find ways of identifying safe areas, close to housing where people and dogs can have a stress free walk'*.

Statistics provided a lot of hard evidence which removed many preconceptions held by conference attendees regarding the causes behind dog attacks. The SheepWatchUK records note that 55% of dogs attacking sheep were not with an owner so were stray dogs or those escaped from back gardens. North Wales Rural Crime Team reported that dog attacks on sheep happen all week (not just weekends) and most during office hours, suggesting that dogs left at home during the day are escaping from gardens. SheepWatchUK also demonstrated that nearly all attacks happen in fully stock fenced fields, and only 38% of fields had footpaths running through them. Also a wide range of dog breeds, from the small to the large, are involved in attacks on livestock.

PC Dave Allen from the North Wales Police Rural Crime Unit (one of the most experienced forces in dealing with dog attacks on sheep) gave an explicit presentation to the conference demonstrating the pain for both the farmer and dog owners and both the sheep and the dogs who are destroyed. He believes that without the clarity in the law and the farmers fully reporting the crime, the issue cannot be solved. Charles Sercombe, Chair of the National Livestock Board for the NFU was completely in support of this and felt that the law needed to be explored, analysed and if necessary reviewed. He also made it very clear that the NFU are there to support farmers when they are hit by dog attacks which can be emotionally devastating, costly and highly frustrating.

This was supported by Phil Stocker, National Sheep Association Chief Executive. An NSA survey conducted this spring showed dog worrying was causing around 85% of affected farmers to experience elevated levels of anxiety and stress. While the cost and extra time needed to deal with attacks was also highlighted, a worrying trend about the personal impact was revealed – 46% of farmers surveyed listed anxiety about spending time away from their farm, 35% said it had a negative impact on their family/social life, 30% cited depression and 24% went as far as to say they had considered giving up

sheep farming. When asked what the single most damaging impact was, the most frequent answer was living with the anxiety of another attack. These stats are behind work by NSA to raise awareness of the issue.

Terena said 'The conference is only the first step. All the organisations joining together like this means we can streamline our response to the problem and pool our expertise to improve communication and education.

This is a hugely devastating issue and the number of sheep being brutally killed makes this an issue of national importance and one which needs addressing immediately.

We will make sure that this conference was not just a talking shop and I am very pleased to say I feel that all those that attended are taking this very seriously.

We can't breathe a sigh of relief yet, but we can know that serious, determined and solid support for change is behind the issue'.

A free conference report will be available within a couple of weeks on the SheepWatch UK website www.terena.co.uk/sheepwatch-uk or send Terena an email TerenaPlowright@gmail.com

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