

RB/JEY

19th September, 2023.

Dear Minister Spencer

I am contacting you as Managing Director of Yorkwold Pigpro Ltd, a family owned, multi-site pig farming business in the North of England, and as chair of the UK's largest pig marketing co-operative, Thames Valley Cambac. I also currently sit on the AHDB Pork Council, the Red Tractor Pork Board, the Pig Health and Welfare Committee as well as several other industry welfare groups.

I recently attended a meeting in Flaxton, near York, organised by the pig breeding company PIC, where we learned that gene edited pigs with complete resistance to the devastating PRRS (Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome) virus are expected to get FDA approval for commercialisation in the United States early next year.

With the Precision Breeding Act now in place, the UK Government has the opportunity to enable pig producers in England to access to the same advanced genetics.

As a pig producer with significant involvement across the industry, I am writing to urge you to ensure that this happens as soon as possible to help alleviate the suffering to animals, and distress to producers, caused by intractable diseases such as PRRS.

The Precision Breeding Act paves the way for gene edited crops and livestock to be introduced on farms in England. I understand that under the terms of the Act, more detailed implementing rules authorising precision bred crops for commercial release and food marketing in England are expected to be finalised in summer 2024, coming into force at the end of 2024.

But Ministers have also indicated that the equivalent process for farmed animals will take much longer, according to some estimates by as much as a further two years (end-2026).

PRRS is a dreadful condition, endemic in both indoor and outdoor pig production in the UK, and responsible for significant losses, as much as £30 million per year in England alone. But as a fellow farmer, I know you will understand that this issue is not just about pounds and pence. It is also about avoiding unnecessary animal suffering, and the distress this causes among producers.

A genetic solution is now available which could eradicate this horrible disease – it seems unethical not to get it out onto farms at the earliest possible opportunity.

I understand the PIC meeting in Flaxton was one of a series of roadshows around the country. It included presentations on the technical background to the application for US FDA approval, submitted in August 2023, as well as the work PIC has been undertaking to build market awareness and acceptance of its PRRS resistant pigs among producers, packers, retailers and consumers in the United States.

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At the end of the meeting, producers were asked for a show of hands indicating their support for the technology. Every hand in the room went up, and in my capacity as chair of Thames Valley Cambac, I know I speak for many hundreds of other pig farmers across the country who are equally keen to see these genetic innovations coming forward as soon as possible.

I would be grateful if you could explain why the implementing arrangements for precision bred farmed animals are expected to take so much longer than for crops, but more importantly I would urge you to confirm that you will do everything in your power to ensure pig producers like myself can access these genetic solutions as soon as is practically possible.

If of interest, I would be very pleased to host a farm visit to one of our sites up here in the North of England, as an opportunity to explain the devastating impact of the PRRS virus when it strikes, the current lack of really effective means of control or treatment, and what an enormous difference access to advanced genetics with complete resistance would make in terms of business productivity, animal health and welfare, and farmer well-being.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R Beckett', written over a horizontal line.

Robert Beckett
Managing Director