



Bovaer: some key lessons learned

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February 2025

Sustainability communications expert Dr Geoff Mackey shares his thoughts on the recent UK media storm over the methane-reducing cattle feed additive, Bovaer, and considers some of the key lessons learned for others considering bringing beneficial farming innovations to market in the UK.

It was a privilege to join MPs, Peers and food security minister Daniel Zeichner recently for the opening ceremony of Agri-Science Week in Parliament, hosted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture.

The first of its kind, busy and well attended, right in the heart of the Palace of Westminster, this exhibit and display provided a showcase for some of the fantastic science and innovation taking place at Britain's research institutes and universities to help reduce the climate impact and improve the sustainability of modern agriculture and food production.

The opening ceremony was followed by a meeting hosted by the All-Party Group, focused on *Farming Innovations to Deliver Net Zero*, bringing together a panel of forward-thinking companies driving new, climate-friendly innovations in UK and global agriculture.

Remediate, for example, are recycling industrial carbon dioxide emissions to grow protein-rich microalgae for animal feed, while **Recycled Crop Nutrients** are re-purposing food, sewage and other waste streams to produce high value green fertilisers, and **MSD Animal Health** are using digital sensor technology to improve the health and welfare of farmed animals.

The line-up also included **dsm-firmenich**, presenting their methane-reducing cattle feed additive, Bovaer, and sharing the experience of finding themselves at the white heat of an unexpected media and social media storm late last year over Arla's announcement, in partnership with food retailers Tesco, Morrisons and Aldi, of a 'trial' of Bovaer on 30 British dairy farms.

At the time, conspiracy theorists on social media accused the companies of using Britain as a test-bed for an 'unproven' product, which they claimed was unnatural, poisonous and carcinogenic, and at risk of being boycotted by consumers and the entire UK dairy industry. Video posts of people flushing milk down the toilet and chucking tubs of butter in the dustbin went viral, and tabloid media outlets ran

headlines littered with hyperbolic terms such as 'contaminated', 'cancer-causing', 'toxic' and 'backlash'.

Together with its supply chain partners, and supported by scientific and industry experts, the audience heard how dsm-firmenich responded rapidly by reiterating some basic facts about Bovaer:

1. Bovaer has been approved for use by the UK Food Standards Agency and European Food Safety Authority. It has been used by EU dairy farmers for over two years, and is already available in 68 countries worldwide.
2. UK dairy farmers supplying M&S were already using Bovaer for a year as part of the retailer's "Plan A" net zero programme.
3. Bovaer is fully metabolised into compounds naturally present in the cow's digestive system. It is not present in milk or meat. It does not affect milk yield, composition or processability. It has no adverse effects on cattle health, fertility or welfare.
4. Bovaer is safe for farmers to handle. Bovaer is present in such small concentrations in mineral feed or feed concentrates that it has the same safety precautions as feed without Bovaer. Feed manufacturers have clear handling procedures when mixing Bovaer into feed. These are standard procedures and apply to other feed materials used at feed mills.
5. Bovaer is proven to reduce methane emissions by about 30% in dairy cows, and by 45% in beef cattle.
6. The above statements are the result of more than 15 years of research, supported by 80 scientific papers in peer reviewed journals.

There are still some naysayers out there, as well as opportunists marketing their milk and dairy products as "Bovaer-free", but this collective response, reinforced by confirmatory statements of Bovaer's safety and efficacy from the UK Government and Food Standards Agency, eventually succeeded in calming the media frenzy, resulting in much more balanced reporting, and ultimately in quizzical opinion pieces along the lines of 'how did this even happen?'

Trying to understand and answer that question will play a key role in better preparing the next beneficial farming innovation likely to come under fire in the UK media, whether that is a novel feed ingredient or crop protection agent, or the next generation of genetically improved crops and livestock.

A first point to note is that, according to dsm-firmenich, the media storm was unique to the UK. This is ironic, since the company is investing heavily in the UK, with its global manufacturing site for Bovaer being built at Dalry near Glasgow, providing much needed jobs and economic activity in the area.

None of the other 68 markets in which Bovaer is now available experienced anything like the UK. Part of the reason for that appears to be the compelling sustainability case behind the product (significantly reducing enteric methane emissions in dairy cattle) and the fact that it can help supply chains achieve their carbon reduction targets.

So, despite suggestions that the British press is now more responsible and less sensationalist in its reporting of science-based stories since the 'Frankenfood'

excesses of the GMO debate almost 30 years ago, this clearly still does not apply to some sections of our tabloid media. The advent of largely uncensored social media platforms has also given the tabloid press a rich new seam of copy to mine.

But while the climate change denying, anti-science keyboard warriors of X and TikTok can be here today, gone tomorrow, analysis of the media storm surrounding Bovaer shows a clear link between the spikes in social media volume and coverage in mainstream media outlets, driven by a desire for sensationalist ‘click bait’ material, however baseless and unsubstantiated.

In addition to regarding the UK media as a ‘special case’ which needs to be treated with some caution, therefore, the key learnings distil down into the following five key points:

Mind your language

Choose your words very carefully. dsm-firmenich and partners learned to their cost that the word ‘trial’ wrongly conjured up the notion of cows and people being used as guinea pigs. ‘Pilot roll-out’ might have been more appropriate. The message could also have been clearer from the start about the fully approved status of Bovaer, and that the British dairy farmers involved were joining thousands of other farmers in 68 countries in using it.

Avoid social media

When sharing news on climate-related or sustainability matters, social media platforms such as X are simply not appropriate, because it has become an echo chamber for a small but influential and ‘noisy’ group of conspiracy theorists.

Focus on the bigger picture

In early 2024, when M&S announced that their milk suppliers were using Bovaer, it was presented as just one element in a much wider programme of farm-level actions focused on improving sustainability and climate outcomes as part of their “Plan A” programme.

Build strong coalitions

Establishing a strong, supply-chain wide coalition based on scientific information was clearly crucial to setting the facts straight, while supporting statements from regulatory and government authorities also helped to correct and dispel misinformation. It is important to engage proactively with media outlets, fact checkers and supportive third-party voices in the scientific community.

Don’t be afraid to say no

Sometimes it is also just best to know when to keep your head down, and which interview requests to politely decline, as this can lead to simply reigniting the issue.

And finally, keep your composure. Keep things in perspective. Social media content in particular can be very aggressive. It’s important not to get overwhelmed.

In the words of Rudyard Kipling: *"If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you..."*

Breathe deep...onward...

Brought up on a family farm in South Armagh, N. Ireland, Dr Geoff Mackey advises a wide range of strategic and tactical groups covering private, public and third sectors in arenas including communications, sustainability, science, environment and further education. He is a former director of the world's largest chemical company BASF plc, where he was responsible for a service portfolio in UK & Ireland, and BASF's Sustainability network in Europe. He holds a number of trustee positions and directorships, and is a Fellow of the Institute of Directors, the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Institute of Environmental Management & Accounting.