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10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

13 December 1988

Dear Shirley,

SALMONELLA IN EGGS

The Prime Minister held a meeting yesterday to discuss the Government's response to the problem of salmonella in eggs. Also present were the Secretary of State for Health, Chief Secretary, HM Treasury, the Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Sir Donald Acheson, Chief Medical Officer, and Mr Keith Meldrum, Chief Veterinary Officer.

The Prime Minister said there was undoubtedly a genuine and growing problem of infection of eggs by salmonella enteritidis PT4, but also that public confidence in eggs had been severely damaged by conflicting statements from the Government. This was affecting the livelihood of egg producers. Egg production was piling up and some slaughtering of flocks had begun. It was essential both to restore confidence and to tackle the underlying problem.

The Minister of Agriculture said he had been in frequent contact with the leaders of the NFU to urge upon them that a high profile campaign was likely to be counter-productive. While they accepted this, they were under great pressure from the egg producers. The NFU were urging a three point approach:-

- (a) a Government advertising campaign to clarify the facts
- (b) action to reduce the size of the national flock
- (c) action to take surplus eggs out of the system.

The second and third were bound to lead to the issue of compensation. While resisting this, he felt that the Government should be prepared to finance an advertising campaign building on the Chief Medical Officer's earlier advice.

The Secretary of State for Health agreed that a high profile campaign by the egg industry would be counter-productive but urged caution about a Government

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advertising campaign. There seemed to be an upward trend in salmonella infection. The Government could not therefore guarantee that even if the Chief Medical Officer's advice were followed that the position on recorded cases of salmonella would be better (this was complicated by the fact that the proportion of cases reported was likely to increase). It would also be difficult to construct a message which satisfied the egg industry.

The Prime Minister said it was essential to tackle the fundamental problem by eradicating or at least reducing very substantially the degree of infection in poultry flocks. The advice of the Chief Veterinary Officer was that this had to be tackled from the top down, starting with the breeding flocks, so that over a period of months the laying flocks could be replaced by healthier birds. The Chief Secretary said that before any commitment to compensation for eradication of diseased flocks could be entered into it was essential to establish the facts of the case, including any possible contributory negligence on the part of the owners of diseased flocks. It would also be essential to ensure that any conditions for compensation did not undermine the position with other animal diseases such as BSE.

Summing up the discussion, the Prime Minister asked the Minister of Agriculture and the Secretary of State for Health to work urgently on the text of a Government message which might be issued in the next few days. This would build on the existing advice from the Chief Medical Officer but would have to strike a difficult balance between giving sound advice to the public on health and convincing the egg industry that enough was being done to restore public confidence in eggs. The legal aspects of providing such advice should also be considered. At the same time, work should be put in hand to bring about a major improvement in the health of the country's poultry flock. Any public expenditure implications should be discussed with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

I am copying this letter to Andy McKeon (Department of Health), Carys Evans (Chief Secretary's Office), Frank Strang (Parliamentary Secretary's office, Ministry of Agriculture) and to Sir Robin Butler.

Your sincerely

Andrew

Andrew Turnbull

Mrs Shirley Stagg
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.