

After 20 years there's one vehicle in **need of a full service**



Norman Bagley, head of policy at AIMS, has concerns about whether Red Tractor is being driven without due care and attention.

I recently took a car to be serviced and have its MOT. Whilst I was waiting for this to be done my mind wondered as to how one of this country's most famous vehicles, The Red Tractor, might fare were it to be subjected to an 'MOT', and a 20-year service as well as what 'advisory notices' might be issued.

Since its inception in 2000, the Red Tractor had, until late 2017 'one careful driver', before the keys were passed to today's man at the wheel.



Looking at the Companies House entry for AFS, the registered keeper of the Red Tractor, I see that there are 19 board members with the organisation, including representation from AHDB and the NFU. It is not based in the heart of the British farmed countryside but instead garaged in Central London.

I entirely support the Red Tractor as an on-farm assurance scheme auditing to a set of world class standards that enables all farmers to supply food which is safe and fit for purpose into the processing sector and in turn to consumers via the retailers and some foodservice operators.

But under the prospective trading opportunities why just the UK?

It is of note that the Red Tractor is not part of the new Trade and Agriculture Commission, nor do they have a place on the new Agri-Food Trade Advisory Group.

Why not?

Possibly because in 20 years they've stuck rigidly to a set of standards for the UK supply chain instead of making themselves relevant in the global market where British agriculture and British food manufacturers must now operate and compete. Maybe I'm not alone in believing that it is due an overhaul to make it fit for purpose in the new markets we are now opening.

In short, there would appear, at present, to be a reluctance for the Red Tractor to be 'driven' outside the UK making it in desperate need for its steering to be realigned to suit the global markets where our country's economic recovery and future prosperity lie.

It certainly doesn't appear to be relevant within 'brand Britain'. After all, nowhere does it appear on the 'Britain is Great' brand assets and I wonder if ever Red Tractor's brand values have been published in any language other than English?

As an organisation it appears to measure success on the value of sales in the UK alone and recognition of the logo.

And in terms of the latter, maybe the question asked shouldn't be 'do you recognise this logo?' but 'what do you understand this logo to mean?'

Of course, my reason for writing this month's column is simple.

My interest lies in the fact that several AIMS members, and we understand others as well, have expressed disquiet about the Red Tractor scheme, and we hear that some of the UK's supermarkets are also beginning to have misgivings as newer, sleeker, possibly more roadworthy models come onto the market. The new information platforms are gaining traction by providing a single point of data for supply chain mapping as well as other relevant product information. With several supermarkets now choosing their own systems and service providers, processing businesses are likely to be faced with more audits, costing the industry far more in time and money, a cost which will ultimately be passed to the consumer.

"Maybe I'm not alone in believing that it is due an overhaul to make it fit for purpose in the new markets we are now opening."

Had Red Tractor 'retuned its engine' some years ago this development would almost certainly not have happened. And wasn't the whole idea of Red Tractor based on there being one system of assurance with one common standard for all consumer facing structures and not a competing assortment?


In the UK retail market where reputation is so important and the supermarket's name is the brand there are some who have already chosen not to use the logo whilst others will site it 'somewhere' on the pack, be it front, side or back suggesting that the Red Tractor is not as valuable as a marketing asset as maybe AFS would like to think it is.

Other AIMS members have asked us why it was that Red Tractor updated its rules at the end of March 2020 but did not contact businesses about these changes until the end of July / early August.

This has caused the question to be asked "is Red Tractor no longer being driven with due care and attention?"

Is it too late for an overhaul?

Let's hope not! It's got a very important job to do.

Red Tractor's message this year is one of '20 Years of Driving British Food Standards'. If they truly wish to be in the driving seat, then it's time to pass the jump leads and get this valuable engine of opportunity for British agriculture and UK food processing going again. 



Norman Bagley is the head of policy at the Association of Independent Meat Suppliers (AIMS).
01609-761547
www.aims2001.co.uk