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Mixed outlook for practical rat control from farmers

In roughly equal measure, concerns and reassurance about rat control on farms have been identified by a recent survey. Working with the NFU, UK Rodenticide Stewardship obtained information from 117 farm owners and managers.

The primary concern, according to stewardship spokesman and Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use chairman Dr Alan Buckle, is that permanent rodenticide baiting is still considered essential - contrary to stewardship guidelines - by one-in-three farmers. "On a positive note," he says, "about one-in-five report using rodenticides only once a year or not at all, and another one-in-four use them just twice to four times a year."

As an incentive to take part, the survey included a draw to win a professional brushcutter, making the point that rat control should begin with keeping a tidy farmstead. The results tell that just over 60% of farmers get this in theory, although arithmetically Dr Buckle points out that this means nearly 40% don't. "Moreover, half of participants scored their own farm's tidiness a mediocre five, six or seven out of ten," he adds.

In addition to poison baits, used by 79%, other control measures were used by some but not all farmers: Denying access to food (58%), traps (40%), rat-proofed buildings (31%), terriers and shooting (31% each).

For an indication of what is at stake here, the Government panel that oversees the stewardship regime said earlier this year that its scrutiny "will focus on the extent of any behavioural change among those operating in the sector and the measurable effect this has on residue levels in non-target animals."

With this in mind, participating farmers appear to share a healthy realism that changes could be introduced if stewardship controls don't produce sufficient beneficial changes. Some 40% regard as 'probable' the hypothetical suggestion that high potency rodenticides might be restricted in future to professional pest controllers only. Another 43% rated this 'possible'.

For an upbeat alternative scenario, Dr Buckle says: "Compelling evidence of professional rodenticides being used without unacceptable effects on the environment means these products could remain available as they are today.

"However, without such evidence, we should anticipate further restrictions on where rodenticides can be used, and by whom. Clearly, a significant share of responsibility for which way this goes is in farmers' own hands."

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