PERSONAL BACKGROUND

1. I, Gary Baldock, have been involved in farming since I was a child, as my family were farm labourers. My professional career started as a farm laborer in 1970 before I took on the farm tenancy at Station Farm Glynde in 1986. This was my farm until taking on the role of Grazing Officer at Sussex Wildlife Trust in 2002, a role in which I am still employed. I also still farm in partnership with my son at Middle Broyle Farm, Ringmer, East Sussex still trading as Station Farm.

2. Station Farm was a mixed farm running over 100 beef cattle and 200 ewes, 160 acres of arable for malting barley and 365 acres in total. 130 acres of the farm was SSSI chalk downland and 40 acres was in an agri-environment scheme for breeding waders.

EVIDENCE

3. My evidence describes my roles and responsibilities for managing the Sussex Wildlife Trust’s grazing programme and how this is carried out to ensure the highest welfare standards for the animals used.

4. Since working for the Sussex Wildlife Trust I have built up the grazing programme from 150 sheep on Malling Down Nature Reserve to up to 150 cattle, 450 sheep and 14 ponies grazing over 1000ha over 16 of the 32 reserves belonging to SWT, as well as other land owned by Horsham District, Hastings Borough, Seaford Town Councils and a Landfill Company. Five of the Reserves are grazed by external graziers for historical and logistical reasons. These animals are kept separate from the Trust’s own livestock.
5. The SWT grazing operation is run out of a central farm, Southerham in Lewes, East Sussex. The facilities here include a barn, facilities for isolation of sick animals, two tractors, two livestock trailers, off road pick up, mobile cattle handling structure and 4 sheepdogs. The farm itself has 130ha of chalk grassland and arable reversion to allow plenty of grazing all year round.

6. Due to the Lewes and surrounding area being a bTB risk area, the Trust has always been very careful with its cattle purchase and movements. The bTB testing regime includes both annual and pre-movement testing.

7. Since 2013 the Trust has run a separate herd of cattle in West Sussex. Although originally from East Sussex they were tested for bTB and because the test was clear then moved to West Sussex Nature Reserves for grazing.

8. The Trust has grazed Stedham Common, adjacent to Iping Common, since 2000. Unfortunately in February 2015 one of the herd of 5 British White cattle tested positive for bTB and had to be destroyed. As a precaution the other 4 animals were also destroyed. These animals had been in West Sussex grazing various Trust reserves since April 2013 and prior to that had had 7 TB tests. Since then Stedham has been left without grazing. However, we plan to re-start the grazing in summer 2016 when we will have our new even tighter animal movement controls in place. The Trust’s vet, Bill Pepper, will give evidence about our new measures.

9. I am responsible for the welfare and financial management of the Trust’s livestock, however since October the Trust has employed a full time Assistant Grazing Officer, Andrew Skudder. We work within the guidelines given in “A Guide to Animal Welfare in Nature Conservation Grazing, September 2001” [SWT document no. 18]. These include “the 5 Freedoms”, a concept developed by the Farm Animal Welfare Council which form the basis for Welfare Codes produced by DEFRA and are also the principles behind the RSPCA-led “Freedom Foods Scheme”. They are used as a foundation for the way the Trust manages its livestock.

10. The 5 Freedoms are:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst;
2. Freedom from discomfort;
3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease;
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour;
5. Freedom from fear and distress.

11. In line with this guidance, the Trust prepares a Grazing System Risk Assessment which assesses the risk to the livestock of any hazard that threatens the 5 Freedoms listed above. An example for Stedham Common is [SWT document no. 19]. Action is taken where reasonably practical to reduce any possible hazard to the livestock for example, we have recently put in place a new animal health plan [SWT document no. 20] to reduce the risk of our cattle contracting bTB in West Sussex. The Proof of Evidence from our vet, Bill Pepper describes our action after a bTB reactor on Stedham Common.
12. When livestock are moved onto a Nature Reserve, notices are put up on all the gates to the site explaining what livestock are present and who to contact in case of emergency. An example of such a notice is [SWT document no. 21]. The animals are checked daily either by the Grazing Officers, the site Reserve Manager or one of our trained volunteer “Lookers”. If the majority of the checks are carried out by volunteers or other staff, the Grazing Officer will always check the livestock at least once a week.

13. The Reserve Managers and volunteer Lookers either attend a day group training session or go out with me for a one to one session on one of the Reserves. The content of the training covers the 5 Freedoms, what to look out for, health and safety and the Trusts procedures. A handbook is provided to all the participants [SWT document no. 22].

14. The system used to ensure that the livestock are checked daily is an online spreadsheet that all Lookers have either direct or indirect access to through the Team Administrator. Once the animals have been checked, the volunteer will text the Grazing Officer to confirm that it is done and either the animals are OK or that further action is required.

15. If an animal is reported sick or injured either by a Looker or a member of the public, I or Andy will attend as soon as possible, usually within an hour depending on where we are currently working within the county and the location of the animal. The Trust belongs to the National Fallen Stock Scheme, for disposal of any livestock that unfortunately have to be destroyed.

16. Fortunately incidents are rare. However, occasionally (perhaps max of 4 times per year), cattle escape either due to gates left open, damaged fences (intentionally by vandals or fallen trees). We have not had any casualties or accidents as a result of this.

17. Breeds of cattle are selected very carefully for their ability to thrive on the type of habitat on each reserve as well as for their good nature. On Heathlands such as Stedham Common, we have used British White Cattle because they are so well suited to the browsing of woody material ie heather, gorse, bramble and birch and are very docile. We have not had any reported incidents of cattle chasing dogs or people.

18. We do not supplementary feed the cattle on the heaths because we closely monitor the amount of forage available on site and take them off site when required. Supplementary feeding would encourage the cattle to wait to be fed rather than forage for themselves. This also assists with the animals’ not associating people with food and ensures that they do not have a tendency to approach people. Energy blocks are made available during bad weather to assist with digestion of coarse material. On a few occasions we have had reports that the cattle are too thin. This has been as a result of misunderstanding/misperception by those with concerns that the cattle should look fat for market. At no time has the Trust’s Vet needed to be involved and we are confident that the animals have not been distressed.

19. Since the Trust recommenced grazing Stedham after a break of circa 60 or 70 years, we have tried different breeds of cattle and ponies, different stocking rates and times of year. We have observed the different effects on the vegetation and the behavior of the animals and settled on a
scheme that we are happy with. We graze British White cattle, and we vary the grazing intensity and period and time of year to emulate naturalized grazing where grazing animals would have been moved around by pressure from predators. Grazing may last up to 18 months, or the site may not be grazed for up to 18 months, however we generally graze for 6 months at varying times of year. The important thing is not to graze exactly the same way each year, year in, year out and to monitor the animals and the habitat. I meet with and discuss the condition of the habitat, available forage and condition of the grazing animals with the Sussex Wildlife Trust’s Senior Ecologist and Reserve Manager. We then adjust the grazing accordingly, either putting on a different number of animals, a different age or change the time period or time of year.

20. The maximum livestock units per hectare (LU/ha) used on Stedham are now 0.14 which is roughly 6 cattle over 35 ha depending on age. A cow is taken as equivalent to 0.8 livestock units. In discussion with my colleagues, if we are successful in gaining permission to fence Iping and Trotton Commons, we anticipate using a similar system with similar stocking rates as Stedham. We may graze more in the spring and summer months to start with, to control the growth of Purple Moorgrass and other grasses. This would equate to around 15 cattle with the possibility of that being slowly increased up to 30 at any one time if, after careful monitoring of their impact, this is deemed appropriate.

21. Stocking rates for commercial beef or dairy farms are generally between 1 and 2.5 LU per hectare: more than ten times that required for conservation grazing.

Signed

Dated 29th February 2016