Summary

Organic livestock farming has grown in Wales in recent years. It is focused on producing animals from a predominantly forage-based system, with an emphasis on maintaining animal health through improved welfare and a reduction in the use of routine, conventional veterinary treatments. Breeding and feeding are important factors of the health and welfare of farm animals in organic systems. The guidelines of EU regulation (EC) 1804/1999 address the issue of sourcing of (breeding) stock. Moreover, only activities such as the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and embryo transfer are excluded, and few provisions are included that concern breeding. A number of breeds used in conventional farming could be considered as ‘high maintenance’ animals requiring regular, prophylactic veterinary treatments and high-energy concentrated feeds to meet their potential. Such breeds may be unable to fulfil their potential performance under an organic system. A number of breeding strategies are outlined briefly, including traits that are important for organic production systems. Sire reference schemes have been introduced on organic farms in recent years. There is an increase in conservation grazing. Some breeds adapt well to these systems; especially local/native breeds since they utilise lower quality feed, are more resilient to climatic stress, and are more resistant to local parasites and diseases. Several actions are being, and have been, undertaken to maintain breed diversity. However, the need for a genetic pool of breeding stock from which to select is not reflected in the national strategies for livestock production. A Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) report (Yarwood and Evans, 2002) identified 18 breeds of sheep and 3 breeds of cattle associated with Wales. Several surveys have shown that, on organic farms, the Suffolk, Lleyn and the Texel are the main sheep breeds. The most popular beef breeds on organic farms are Welsh Black, Charolais crossbreed, Limousin, South Devon crossbreed, Aberdeen Angus and Hereford crossbreed. On organic farms, more native breeds seem to be used than on conventional farms. A few of these breeds are further discussed. Consumer demand is a significant driver of policy and standards, and value for money is still a major factor in determining consumer buying behaviour. The demand for lean meat and for homogeneity of both fresh and processed products, particularly in the major supermarkets, impacts on breeding policies. Research has shown that Welsh consumers prefer organic Welsh meat and milk. Economic viability of beef, sheep and milk production depends, in many cases, on subsidies. An increasing number of breed societies in Wales and the UK have become involved in promoting their breed as a brand. However, a recent Welsh survey showed that 13% of organically-produced lambs were still being sold as nonorganic due to finishing specifications (41%), a lack of organic market outlets (54%) and other reasons (4%), such as a lack of organic abattoirs (OCW, 2006). As market requirements are standardised and allow for little differentiation, some traditional and rare breeds face marketing difficulties. Furthermore, loss of small-scale abattoirs can reduce the ability for differentiation of breeds to enter niche markets. Large-scale abattoirs use standardised methods, which do not allow for differentiation. As mentioned in a report from DEFRA (2006), the national strategies for livestock production do not reflect the need for a genetic pool of breeding stock. Although breeding has to focus on what the market wants (mass or niche market), other factors also have to be taken into account. The choice of breeds/breeding used in the organic livestock sector needs to ensure the profitability of the farm, safeguard animal health and welfare, focus on conserving genetic diversity, and promote human health. The various breeds outlined in the report show various benefits. It is important to conserve, develop and utilise local breeds that are genetically adapted to their environment.
Livestock used as breeder stock may be moved from a non-organic operation onto an organic operation at any time. However, if the livestock are gestating and the offspring are to be raised as organic slaughter stock, the breeder stock must be brought onto the organic farm and managed organically no later than the last third of gestation. Bulls used for breeding purposes only do not need to be managed organically. Unless breeder or dairy animals have been fed and managed organically their entire lives, beginning the last third of gestation prior to their birth, they cannot be sold as organic sla