

Meat inspection data – are we communicating the true value?

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It is widely accepted that there is value in communication of meat inspection findings across the meat supply chain. This information is useful in informing the processor of the potential saleable yield from an animal, including any aspects that could help in taking actions to reduce or minimise any detrimental public health effects and for the producer in alerting him to any issues with his livestock, particularly around animal health and welfare.

While this information is currently collected, its value is not fully exploited across all supply chains, for example, it is more likely to be used in the pig sector than the ruminant sectors. This is probably due to the higher degree of integration and when it comes to animal health and greater involvement of veterinary surgeons at the farm health planning level.

In Great Britain, an initiative by BPEX, the representative organisation for the pig sector, to document and feedback inspection data on lung lesions and other conditions to both producer and vet has led to a significant reduction in infection with positive animal health and productivity gains (Fig. 1).

Increased live fluke

The ruminant sector, however, is some way behind and is not capitalising on the opportunity to drive improvements. An example of this is the rising incidence of liver fluke.

There are several reasons why fluke incidence could be increasing including milder, wetter summers and rising populations of the intermediate host, the mud snail, *Galba truncatula*. What is clear is that not only is the prevalence increasing on farms that have a history of fluke infection, but it is also beginning to appear on farms with no previous issues and here lies the dilemma.

If the producer is not able to detect sub-clinical infection or made aware of the presence of fluke following slaughter, then they cannot take the simple and cost effective action of antiparasitic treatment.

Furthermore, the true cost of productivity

loss of each infected case is estimated to be in the order of £30 to £40, with a further loss of £4 to £5 to the processor as the liver is excluded from the food chain. This adds up to a significant loss to the GB supply chain on bovine liver fluke alone and, given that it is easily controlled, surely merits increased focus on information feedback.

EBLEX, the levy payer organisation for the beef and sheep sectors in England, is highlighting these cost impact issues to the industry to drive change.

The legal requirement across the EU for the producer to supply information about livestock such as health and medicine withdrawal periods to the processor (Food Chain Information or FCI) has been in place for some time, along with the Collection and Communication of Inspection Results (CCIR) to go back to the producer. An example of this would be the APHIS system in Northern Ireland.

A recently conducted survey of livestock producers carried out by MLCLS Ltd and EBLEX on behalf of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) – the body responsible for meat policies and the abattoir meat inspection and veterinary service in Great Britain – asked those who received inspection results if they had taken action, with 70% saying they had done so and the remainder expressing an intention to do so in the future. This indicates that this information when available is utilised by producers to inform health planning and, as such, has benefits for livestock health and productivity.

However, the longer term challenge is to make this information available to all in a timely fashion and the engagement of the veterinary profession by producers to use this data in the proactive planning of farm health programmes.

The barriers?

Traditionally, the collection of meat inspection data was done by hand, with a written report generated, typically at the end of each working day. This information was captured by the meat inspection service and communicated to the Food Business Operator. The accuracy of this data in relation to specific animals or even batches of



animals was not always high as the requirement to record using a paper based system on fast moving slaughter lines was troublesome and, unless significant losses occurred, was often not fed back to the producer.

In addition, this information from several hundred establishments was then co-ordinated by the FSA to give overall data across the country. Both these exercises clearly involve excessive staff time and costs associated with collection, postage, data input and dissemination, as well as the opportunity for errors across the links in the chain. Any further communication of this information back to the livestock producer adds a further level of activity.

The opportunities?

The necessary IT systems are now available to record meat inspection data on-line using touch screen technology. In Great Britain, the FSA and industry have agreed the key most commonly occurring conditions to record that the producer can realistically address at the production level. The FSA has also expressed the commitment to work with the industry to ensure that any in-plant equipment installed is compatible with their operating systems to offer real time data collection and transfer.

This further gives the processor the opportunity to provide this feedback on each batch or individual animal to communicate health challenges at the farm level to drive improvements. Clearly, this is a win-win situation for all involved and one the industry should seek to capitalise on. ■

EBLEX, is an independent levy-funded organisation and does not recommend or endorse any specific products or manufacturers.