

FOCUS

SUMMER ANIMAL HEALTH



Ger Cusack of Comeragh Veterinary scanning cows as part of breeding strategy during a visit to dairy farmer Niall Moore, Annestown, Co Watterford. Niall is one of the farmers taking part in Project Engage which is focused on reducing the use of antibiotics on farms. \ Donal O'Leary

INTRODUCTION

Innovative initiatives get closer and closer

It's hard to be prescriptive and absolutely definitive on animal health as on-farm issues sometimes jump up and bite when you are least expecting them. Weather, a change to a farm building, new animals coming into a herd or flock, or even a new person doing some work on the farm all can affect herd health in an unplanned way.

The objective of the Engage programme as outlined in case studies in these pages is to reduce the amount of antibiotics used, and, more importantly the amount of critically important antibiotics used on farms.

Vet Tommy Hefernan started this project in conjunction with XLVets using the Virtual Vet platform at the end of last year. The farmers involved are allowing data from their farms be collated and used for this year one pilot project.

Animal health often plays a hidden but significant role at farm level and touches off some of the most basic building blocks of the sector.

Without measurement it's hard to change. Sharing knowledge should help. Animal health affects farm resources, sustainability, finance and much more.

Preventative medicine has come a long way, and farmers can see the benefits more and more, especially when it's tied in with a national programme for management or eradication.

No matter what agri sector we look at – the suckler, the dairy or the pig and poultry sector – all need to be top of class on animal health.

All the innovative initiatives each year are coming closer to reality, whether it's Protective Geographical Indication (PGI) status for beef, selective dry cow therapy in cows or antibiotic-free pigs or poultry, these need top class management and measurement. Staying best of class on animal health is critical. Farmers at the coalface must meet the challenge.



Jack Kennedy

Engage: dairy farmers in Cork and Waterford meeting the challenges



Aidan Brennan speaks to the Cork- and Waterford-based dairy farmers and vets about their involvement in Project Engage so far in 2020

Project Engage

Project Engage is a pilot project involving a number of farmers spread around the country who engage with their own vets to examine and measure the use of antibiotics on their farms.

This pilot is being delivered by XlVet practices, with Virtual Vet providing a system of farmer friendly recording of medicine use, and supported by the *Irish Farmers Journal*.

How it works is that the vets do a planned visit to the farms every two to three months. Together with the farmer, they look back over the recent antibiotic usage and discuss the disease issues that necessitated their use.

"Following on from that discussion, they look forward to the upcoming few months and the likely animal health challenges that could emerge," said Ger Cusack, Project Engage co-ordinator.

"While some talk will be about the most effective and appropriate treatments, much of the focus centres on how best to prevent problems arising in the first place."

We are all familiar with the adage that "prevention is better than cure". This approach is central to Project Engage. The focus is on prediction of the likely disease challenges before they happen and putting preventative measures in place to minimise the losses associated with these diseases.

Niall Moore

Niall is milking 130 cows in a split-calving system near Anestown in Co Waterford. Niall has been using a robotic milking system since 2016 and so has a wealth of information on his herd.

This information came in very handy over the last few months as a leptospirosis outbreak was identified early. In Niall's case, the symptoms were a spike in SCC followed in about half of the cases with a drop in milk over a short period. Individual quarter conductivity tests on the robot allowed the problem cows to be identified early.



Initially, the cows were being treated for mastitis, but local vet Ger Cusack took blood samples to rule out other issues and leptospirosis came up high in the results. The sick cows have been treated with antibiotics and all the herd has since been vaccinated.

"It's something we never had before, but the herd has expanded over the last few years so we must've brought it in from somewhere, but at least we've got to the bottom of it now," Niall says.

Another issue that has cropped up since expanding has been Mortellaro. Ger says he finds that he is treating a lot more cows with Mortellaro and foot rot-type diseases over the last few years. Niall is now foot-bathing all cows weekly as part of the prevention process using a range of different products including peracetic acid and occasionally formalin.

Joe Spillane, Riverview Veterinary Clinic



John Salmon from Riverview Veterinary Clinic has two farmers in the Engage programme. Joe Spillane is milking 87 cows just outside Carrigaline in Co Cork. Antibiotic usage on Joe's farm was always on the low side, even before he joined the programme, but since joining Engage his antibiotic usage has decreased further.

The main health issue on the farm has been mastitis in milking cows. Somatic cell count was usually hovering around the 170,000 to 180,000 mark but this year that is back to around 80,000 and there have been fewer clinical cases of mastitis than in other years. Cows that do show up with mastitis are getting treated with fewer antibiotics than previously.

John says the process started last autumn before cows were dried off. Cows that had clinical cases during 2019 or who had a high cell count in milk recording were sampled and a culture and sensitivity analysis was carried out on the samples.

"This told us what type of bug was present and so we were able to target that bug with an antibiotic dry cow tube which we knew would be effective against it. During this process we also identified cows that didn't need any antibiotics, so about 10% of the herd just got a teat sealer. This was the first time Joe used selective dry cow therapy," John says.

Joe says there was a good response to the change in dry cow tube and cure rate over the winter was better than normal. The other big change made is that usage of additional antibiotics to treat mastitis has reduced dramatically. Previously, an injection such as Tylosan would have been administered along with an antibiotic tube but Joe now mostly just uses the tube and where there is swelling an anti-inflammatory drug is now used also.

Usage of anti-inflammatory drugs in the treatment of mastitis has increased and Joe is very happy with the results so far.

"Thankfully there has never really been a big issue with calves on this farm and that hasn't changed. The plan for the next few weeks is to take a few dung samples and get them tested for worms before going in with the first dose. This was a

hope to let the calves build up some immunity to worms," John said.

Brendan Barry



Another of John's clients in the programme is Brendan Barry, who milks around 150 cows outside Inishannon in Co Cork. Brendan had issues with pneumonia in calves in the past so in the season just gone they decided that the calves would be vaccinated against RSV P13 pneumonia.

John says that calf health was very good in the first part of the calving season but an outbreak of pneumonia in late April and early May set back some of the calves and resulted in all the calves in that batch being treated with antibiotics.

"I know the aim of the project is to reduce antibiotic usage and the reason for that is that in the event of a disease outbreak we want to have the antibiotics available to us. That's what happened in this case—the calves needed to be treated so we treated them," John says.

Since then, calf health has improved greatly and the calves are now thriving again. Brendan is going to weigh them next week and a dosing regime will be decided upon for the rest of the year. Because some of the calves got pneumonia and possibly have lung damage, John pointed out that lungworm will be a particular risk to these calves.

In general, John says the programme has been beneficial to both him and the farmers involved. The big change has been a reduction in antibiotic usage across the farms and probably more diagnostic tests carried out. John visits the farms for more routine visits to take samples, something which Joe Spillane says has been a help.

"It's good to have John around more as he can point a thing out that maybe I wouldn't take notice of, or get used to."

Growvite

For Champion Results!

Trial Results Available

Supplies an oral drench of chelated Minerals, Vitamins & Trace Elements essential for fertility and thrive in Cattle and Sheep

www.growvite.com

Tel: 00353 49 555 3203

Manufactured in a GMP compliant facility ensuring consistently high quality products.

New Allicine Bolus

For Udder Health

Zero withdrawal for Milk

Ryall O'Mahony Ltd
MIDLETON
Tel: 021 4634144
www.ryallomahony.com