

Policy Paper: Herd Health Plan

to be addressed to the EU Commission

President:
Zsolt Pinter

General Secretary:
Andrew Robinson

Treasurer:
Anne Ceppi

Vice-Presidents:
Andrew Byrne
Thierry Chambon
Rens Van
Dobbenburgh

Safe food is produced by healthy animals. Health and welfare are greatly influenced by the way animals are kept. The farmer is responsible to achieve optimal animal health and welfare. To support the farmer with the implementation of the above mentioned requirements the design of a **Herd Health Plan** for each specific farm as part of the "stable to table" approach is advisable.

The role of the farmer has changed during recent years: from 'producing animals' towards 'producing food'. Current legislation therefore refers to the farmer as "**food business operator**" (**FBO**) who "*shall ensure that all stages of production, processing and distribution of food under their control satisfy the relevant hygiene requirements*" laid down in Regulation (EC) No 852/2004 on the hygiene of foodstuffs, *Art 3*. In addition annex I of Regulation (EC) No 852/2004 lays down general hygiene requirements to be respected by food businesses at all stages of the food chain.

The new **Animal Health Strategy for the European Union** (2007-2013) where "*Prevention is better than cure*" (COM 539 (2007) final) also emphasises on the importance of on-farm biosecurity measures and on the crucial role farmers have in this (pillar 3). But not only farmers: '*a collective approach must be taken in addressing prevention and biosecurity measures*'. This includes the private practitioner as an advisor and partner who is helping the farmer to assure the health of the farmed animals and therefore the quality of his products, and the Official Veterinarian who is performing regular checks on a certain number of farms per year.

The Veterinary Herd Health Management is an integral part of the health management of herds. It comprises the regular, planned, systematic, and consequent application of veterinarians' expert knowledge and capabilities for whom the target is to support the animal owners in the creation of improvements and in the maintenance of the animals' health as well as the optimisation of the animals' performance. The animal owner (primary producer) and veterinarian taking care of the herd health management thus gain more legal security.

The Veterinary Herd Health Management comprises a comprehensive and sustained animal health and hygiene management, the main target being - in addition to the prevention of diseases - the welfare of animals (apt for animals) as well as the application of all known measures for food security. This also includes the expertly justified and thus targeted use of medical products for animals and the minimising of the use of antibiotics.

An essential common target is the improvement of animal health and, consequently, of the economic results of a farm.

The Herd Health Plan (HHP) ~~should~~ **has to** include good husbandry practices (housing, climate, water/feeding and management), guidelines for the use of veterinary medicinal products and feed additives, as well as a plan of preventative healthcare

Rue Defacqz, 1
1000 Brussels
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and guidelines for the prevention of epizootics and zoonotic diseases (EPRUMA Best Practice Framework for the use of Antimicrobials in Food-Producing Animals in the EU, September 2007). The HHP (**should**) **has to** include guidelines for farm visitation scheme. The HHP can also help the farmer to establish hygiene schemes and to fulfil the requirements on microbiological criteria for foodstuff (Regulation (EC) 2073/2005).

Protocols and a recording system (either in paper or digital format) to monitor herd health and welfare should be established and the plan should include an agreement about regular visits by the **veterinary practitioner** ('health visitation scheme').

This does not cover the day to day regular veterinary work of the practitioner like treating sick or injured animals.

Other important components of a Herd Health Plan are:

- Quarantine plan for new animals entering the farm
- Infectious disease control plan, isolation facilities, biosecurity, measures in order to prevent spreading of diseases from animal to animal as well as from farm to farm
- contingency plans
- Identification system for all animals, including systems for treated animals
- Recording system of movements and traceability of livestock
- Frequency of observations of animal health and welfare status by farmer
- Prevention and control of production specific diseases
- Vaccination plan
- Parasite control and treatment plan (not only in livestock but also in companion animals living on the same farm)
- Disposal of dead livestock (in accordance with national legislation and Regulation (EC) 1774/2002)
- Animal welfare checks
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Aim **of the HHP is to add value for the farmer**: enhanced animal health and animal welfare **which will lead to an increase in high quality products and decrease** responsible use of medicines **in use of medicine**, and other treatments, and therefore also reduce costs, **which benefits the farmer.**

The **veterinarian designated** veterinary practitioner should also provide help to the FBO with record keeping

(Annex I of Regulation (EC) 852/2004 Part A, III, 8 lays down the FBO's responsibilities with regards to record keeping). The records need to be always up-to-date, especially on the following items, which should be included into the Herd Health Plan:

- Nature and origin of feed, to include ingredients of the feed
- Applied veterinary medicinal products or other treatments, dates of administration, withdrawal periods
- Occurrence of diseases: e.g. food born diseases, zoonoses, mastitis, reproductive disorders, lameness, metabolic disorders.
- Results of analysis (samples taken from animals or their products) and consequences
- Any reports on checks carried out on animals or their products
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All these informations can be part of the **Food Chain Information** (FCI, Regulation (EC) No 853/2004, Annex II, Section III, para 3), which needs to be provided to the slaughter facility.

The veterinarian is the expert best placed to interpret the results of analysis or checks including ante- and post-mortem findings reported from the slaughter facility. The expertise of the veterinarian therefore will not only give credibility to the FCI send to the slaughter facility, but also help the FBO to take the necessary steps in order to enhance animal health and/or animal welfare (e.g. treat remaining herd if parasitic infestation is apparent at slaughter plant).

Regular visits by the **designated veterinarian** **veterinary practitioner** should be established in the HHP depending on **the animal species, the type of holding, the size of the farm**, and the risk for introducing/spreading diseases, while also considering existing health problems on the holding. The HHP should be revised **regularly** (at least annually) in order to detect weak points or adjust to structural changes.

B) Common Procedures / Application

The following second part of this paper gives an overview of the important aspects to be included in the HHP. This list is not exhaustive and needs to be adjusted to the specific needs of every single FBO.

Record keeping: on feed, medicinal products and other treatments, occurrence of diseases, findings on health and welfare observations by the farmer, results and consequences of relevant analysis, relevant reports on checks (on animals or products) and on findings in slaughterhouses.

If new herd health problems arise they need to be described, including a proposal for improvement and/or treatment, and a follow-up needs to be performed.

Animals: species and category, source of animals and/or semen, numbers of animals in and out (reason for movement).

Identification + Registration: national and EU law needs to be fulfilled, additional system for identification of treated animals.

Biosecurity: disinfectants (where, when, what), special protective clothing (visitors), cars on farm (e.g. facilities for disinfection of cars/transporters), roadways, pest control, restrictions for domestic animals (e.g. no entry into stables), quarantine, controlled animal purchase, materials, equipment, disposal of carcasses and litter, farm location (e.g. new buildings), visitors on farms, visitor parking.

Prevention measures: e.g. vaccination, deworming.

Animal Housing: climate, light, materials, appropriate equipment (meeting animal welfare criteria).

Animal Welfare: handling of animals, housing of animals (e.g. density, enriched environment), transport.

Education and training of personal: relevant legislation, welfare, biosecurity, hygiene matters.

Feed + water supply: source (feed: supplier, water: e.g. own source), storage, hygienic management, list of ingredients of the composed feed.

Health facts such as: fertility, body condition score, claw/hoof health (including routine foot-care), number of animals culled for disease, clinical disease frequency (pinpoint which diseases are important for the farm depending on species and area: bacteria/virus/parasitic), performance (e.g. litter size, growth rate, milk production, cell count, mortality).

Participation in programs: depending on animal species and region.

Necropsy examination and laboratory testing: e.g. serological tests, nasal swabs, sampling of feed, environmental tests.

Treatments: drug administration + documentation, drug storage, **vaccination**, antiparasitic

treatment, routine treatment (e.g. food additives), non routine treatment (e.g. antibiotics, anti-inflammatory).

Check list: Annex to Herd Health Plan document, facilitates use of the document by having bullet points which can easily be checked.

C/ Operational objectives of the visitation

In practice, specific items would be given special attention during the visitation:

- General information: type of production, inventory of movements of the animals, milk production...
- Sanitary protection: other species, risk management and assessment
- Housing and facilities: quarantine, calving facilities, nursery, dead animal storage
- Sanitary assessment and management of animals: fattening status, abortion, records of diseases...
- Welfare assessment: zoo technical parameters, transportation, animal handling
- Management and use of veterinary medicines: storage, prescriptions, withdrawal time...
- Hygiene package: milking hygiene, ante mortem examination, emergency slaughter
- Environment: waste disposals, circulation of vehicle and people
- Book keeping: herd register, laboratory results

Guidelines based on commonly adopted documents like the OIE recommendations must be set up for these audits so as to be easily used by the veterinarians.

At the end of the visitation, an evaluation would be given for each item (good, to be improved, not satisfying), and advices and recommendations written on the final report. One example of this report would be given to the farmer or the animal keeper and another one sent to the competent authorities and the official veterinarians by the practitioner. The report can be handwritten or computerized and is available in a template ready to use (tick or cross or circle; only recommendations and advices need to be written).

These visitations can be implemented gradually and progressively. It is possible to start with only 4 or 5 items, and to add new items or replace old items every year according to the sanitary status of the farm and the national or European epidemiological situation.

These visitations should involve all type of productions, from milking cow to pigs, from exotic to dogs, etc, each one with its own specificity.

The farmer is obliged to provide the veterinarians (private and official) with all the informations needed for appropriate visitation.

The animal owner informs the veterinarian handling the herd health management of any deviations from the health and performance status presenting themselves within the herd.

This visitation should be performed at least once a year but would need to be adapted to the type of production concerned and problems encountered. For example, dairy cows would need a visitation a year whereas for poultry, a visitation every two months might turn out to be necessary due to the important

rotation of lots. But, in this case, the content of the visitation must be adapted as it would certainly not be necessary to check each time all the items listed for the first visitation.

The FVE stresses on the importance to grant sufficient time to these visitations so that both veterinarians and farmers can go properly through the different items and therefore fulfil this work in the most efficient way.

The farmer or the animal keeper or rearer is free to choose his own veterinarian. But our recommendation would be to choose the usual veterinarian, that is to say the vet who usually has the animals under his care. It also brings the guarantee that this practitioner has a clear and global vision of the farm, including its human aspects.

In case of several productions on the same place, which might require different veterinarians, only one veterinarian will deal with the general items common to all productions and will inform the other veterinarians. Afterwards, each practitioner will treat the specific items related to the production which he is in charge of.

The system of farm visitation should be co-financed by the European Union, the Member States as well as the farmers and other animal keepers. Funds previously intended for the BSE could be used, as well as from the European Regional Development Funds or the Common Agricultural Policy.