

ANIMAL HEALTH IRELAND

Activities
contributing to the
sustainability of
the beef sector



MII Meat
Industry
Ireland
ibec



NATIONAL BEEF HEALTH PROGRAMME

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Beef HealthCheck
Animal Health Ireland.ie



Animal Health Ireland (AHI) is a private-public partnership established between almost 40 private agri-sector stakeholders (of which the meat processing sector is a key component) and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM).

AHI aims to provide the knowledge, education and coordination required to establish effective control programmes for important diseases of livestock that are not subject to international regulation and in so doing to contribute to an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable farming and agrifood sector through improved animal health and welfare.



AHI delivers a range of programme and activities that contribute to the sustainability of the beef sector.

Beef HealthCheck (BHC)

This programme is delivered in partnership with meat processors and Meat Industry Ireland. Liver (liver fluke and abscesses) and lung lesions are captured by veterinarians using touch screen technology in participating abattoirs. Findings on individual animals are reported back to farmers for each batch submitted. In addition, results are recorded on the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF) website through online BHC dashboards developed for AHI. These allow farmers and their veterinary practitioners to review and analyse all their data, captured since the programme began in 2016, as part of herd health planning. In addition, the data have provided the basis for the demonstration by ICBF of the heritability of resistance to infection with liver fluke. ICBF now publish quarterly updates of proofs for beef and dairy bulls ranked on the predicted prevalence of infection in their progeny (<https://www.icbf.com/health-trait-results/>) and is also available for all genotyped animals. Incorporation of these findings into breeding indices has the potential to contribute to a sustainable approach to fluke control that is complementary to current strategies based on treatment with flukicides and management. Over the course of the BHC programme, the prevalence of liver fluke infection has fallen from over 26% (2016) to 8% currently (2023) in animals under 30 months. Analysis of programme data has shown that when other factors were accounted for, heifers and steers without evidence of liver fluke infection were on average 38 days younger at slaughter, highlighting the sustainability benefits of effective fluke control in terms of both reduced production costs and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per unit of output. Nationally, these are estimated to amount to a €18 million increase in net margin and a reduction in emissions of 140.7 ktCO₂e. Similarly, heifers and steers without evidence of liver abscesses or pneumonia were, respectively, at least 8 and 11 days younger at slaughter. Currently, the BHC captures data from approximately 50% of the national kill. Work is ongoing to increase this to 100% for MII members, in line with the Irish Beef Sector Sustainability Roadmap to 2030.

During 2022 and 2023, AHI has co-ordinated a Targeted Advisory Service on Animal Health (TASAH) addressing Parasite Control for cattle and sheep farmers. These are delivered by trained veterinary practitioners and facilitate discussions and planning with farmers on best practices around parasite control with the goal of minimising the further development of anthelmintic resistance. Over 16,000 herds and flocks completed this activity in 2022, increasing to over 26,000 in 2023. A wide range of resources have also been developed to provide farmers, advisors and vets with best practice in terms of controlling a wide range of both internal and external parasite of cattle and sheep.

Both BHC and TASAH activities are part of a wider contribution of AHI to the Action Plan of the Antiparasitic Resistant Stakeholder Group convened by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM).

National bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) eradication programme

AHI co-ordinates this programme which began in 2013. It is based on testing tissue samples collected using a tissue-sample enabled national identity tag to allow the identification of persistently infected calves at birth. The programme has seen a significant reduction in prevalence, with positive results in 2023 being recorded for just over 200 herds out of more than 60,000 breeding herds nationally. The programme was approved by the European Commission in 2022 under the Animal Health Law, with this being a precursor to applying for recognition of freedom. Progress to date has already contributed to the increased sustainability of cattle production in Ireland, with an estimated net economic benefit to industry of ~€89M in 2023 alone; an environmental benefit through increased efficiency of production and a corresponding decrease in GHG production per unit of output; social benefits through improved welfare as a result of reduced levels of respiratory and enteric disease in calves and reproductive disease in breeding stock, with an associated reduction in antimicrobial usage (AMU).

This is one example of how AHI activities are contributing to the second Irish National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance 2021-2025 (iNAP2) as part of a wider One Health initiative.

Control and eradication of Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR)

This has been listed in the government's Climate Action Plan (2021) as one of the animal health and welfare measures to improve efficiency and reduce emissions of GHG, with the lead role assigned to AHI. In response, a detailed submission, proposing several options and supported by detailed modelling, has been presented to government and wider stakeholders for consideration. In addition to addressing environmental sustainability, control and eradication will also contribute to economic sustainability, reflecting the losses associated with the disease, and also to social sustainability through improved health and welfare and reduced (AMU). Already, even in advance of a national programme, there has been a considerable increase in the level of vaccination, consistent with the principle that prevention is better than cure.

CalfCare

Successful rearing of calves is vital to ensuring their future productivity, and this programme has developed a wide range of information providing best practice in relation to nutrition, management, housing and control of diseases, particularly those affecting the respiratory and intestinal tracts. This information is communicated to farmers, advisors and vets through newsletters, bulletins, videos and on-farm events, with a current focus on supporting the integration of dairy and beef sectors.

Biosecurity

Good biosecurity is central to limiting the impact of diseases already present on farms (biocontainment) and preventing the introduction of new infections (bioexclusion). AHI has developed a range of resources to support farmers, advisors and vets in implementing both of these elements. AHI is also currently working with other stakeholders to develop national biosecurity codes for beef and dairy herds in support of a National Farmed Animal Biosecurity Strategy.

Irish Johne's Control Programme (IJCP)

AHI co-ordinates this voluntary programme to address Johne's disease. While the primary focus is on the dairy sector, this has the potential to also benefit the beef sector, given the increasing integration between the two, both in terms of the proportion of the national kill derived from the dairy herd and the use of cross-bred animals from dairy herds as breeding stock in suckler herds. The rate of dairy calf mortality is low in Ireland by international standards and has reduced further in recent years to a 100-day mortality risk of only 3.7%. Analysis has also shown that the reduction in calf mortality in herds participating in the IJCP exceeded that seen in the general population, with this considered to reflect the impact of the veterinary risk assessment and management planning (VRAMP) element of the programme.

CellCheck

This is the national udder health programme co-ordinated by AHI, with a specifically dairy focus. Two key goals within the programme currently are supporting herds in making the transition from blanket to selective dry cow therapy and in implementing DAFM policy on reducing the usage of the highest priority critically important antibiotics (HP-CIAs), with both again addressing elements of iNAP2. Progress with both of these is demonstrated through analysis of data on the sales of in-lactation and dry period intra-mammary antibiotics for the treatment and prevention of infections, which show reductions in both overall sales and in the proportion of remaining sales that contain a HP-CIA.

For more information on all of our activities, and available resources see
www.animalhealthireland.ie



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