

# Pig HealthCheck Programme – new opportunities for practitioner engagement

**Dr Carla Gomes, programme manager, Pig HealthCheck Programme, Animal Health Ireland, outlines the details of a new programme focused on the pig sector**

In 2019, the national pig herd consisted of 1,631 active herds containing 1,644,121 pigs, comprising 141,622 breeding pigs, 1,501,791 fattening pigs and 708 non-production pigs. Of these, 373 herds (22.8% of total herds) had more than 100 pigs at the time of the Census and, furthermore, 279 herds (17.1% of the total herds) had more than 1,000 pigs and produced 96.7% of the total pigs (2019 Pig Census).

Pig HealthCheck (PHC) is an Animal Health Ireland (AHI)-led programme co-funded by pig farmers and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) with the aim of improving the profitability and sustainability of the Irish pig industry through improved animal health and welfare. The programme focuses on providing a holistic approach to animal health and welfare at both farm and national levels, through the use of benchmarking tools to allow farmers, veterinary practitioners and advisers to monitor the farm status through a range of measures and to compare farm performance with the national profile.

As with the other AHI programmes, the programme is overseen by two stakeholder groups: firstly, the Technical Working Group (TWG), which provides the science behind the programme; secondly, the cross-industry PHC Implementation Group (IG) which oversees the management of the programme. The TWG comprises experts from a variety of fields, including experienced practitioners, who are tasked with drawing up science-led resources, the development of decision-making tools, and the identification of areas for further research and development. The guidance and resources are then presented to the PHC IG for discussion and decision, thus shaping the development and implementation of the programme. Veterinary Ireland is one of the stakeholder organisations that is a member of the IG. You can find out more about both of these groups at: [http://animalhealthireland.ie/?page\\_id=25292](http://animalhealthireland.ie/?page_id=25292) and [https://animalhealthireland.ie/?page\\_id=25627](https://animalhealthireland.ie/?page_id=25627).

## THE PHC PROGRAMME CURRENTLY ADDRESSES FIVE KEY AREAS:

### 1. Biosecurity

Biosecurity assessments are conducted on farm, based

on Biocheck UGent (a risk-based scoring system developed by the University of Ghent to evaluate on-farm biosecurity in pig farms) and delivered by trained private veterinary practitioners (PVPs) through the Targeted Advisory Service on Animal Health (TASAH) under the Rural Development Programme (2014-2020).

### 2. Animal welfare

Conducting assessments of risk factors for tail biting, based on a tool developed collaboratively between Teagasc, DAFM and AHI, delivered by AHI-trained PVPs and paid for through the TASAH mechanism.

### 3. Animal health

Capturing, analysing and reporting of abattoir data from ante- and post-mortem (AM/PM) meat inspection, based on the system being developed by DAFM.

### 4. Antimicrobial usage (AMU)

Analysing AMU, using the database created by DAFM for recording AMU by pig farmers and linking this data with health/disease data to demonstrate inter-relationships (eg. low AMU associated with high health status).

### 5. Veterinary public health

Reviewing the National Salmonella Control Programme (NSCP), making recommendations to augment the existing programme by providing direction to increase engagement by both farmers and PVPs with the NSCP and to improve the outcomes achieved.

Through bringing together these five key areas at farm level, the PHC programme will provide valuable information to the farmer, his/her veterinary practitioner and advisers that can be used to identify areas requiring improvement and guide agreement on targeted interventions. Ultimately, when coupled with benchmarking, this will help farmers to improve their production performance.

To achieve this, a database is being created that will allow all data captured from the five key areas described above to be linked and analysed. This database will allow the creation of dashboards for each component of the programme which will display the farm data and benchmark them against the performances of other herds and national averages. This new

PHC database is being developed for AHI by the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF).

### ACCESS

Access for each individual farmer will be through the PHC database and will be password protected. Individual farm data will also be accessible by each herd's nominated attending veterinary practitioner. The 'attending veterinary practitioner' is the veterinary practitioner (or a group of veterinary practitioners) who has been given responsibility for primary care of a patient/herd/flock by the animal owner/keeper. A client-patient-practice relationship (CPR) is established (as per Veterinary Council of Ireland's [VCI's] Animals Under Veterinary Care document guidelines). The DAFM has recently written to all pig herds that are part of the NSCP to ask them to confirm the identity of their attending veterinary practitioner. While larger herds are likely to nominate specialist pig vets, it is likely that general practitioners will be also nominated for some herds. Some of the responsibilities of the attending practitioner include the delivery of TASA-funded activities (currently biosecurity and tail-biting risk assessments but likely to expand further).

The development of the dashboards will be done in stages and farmers and their attending vets will be trained during 2021/2022 in how to access the database, view the data and use the dashboards effectively. Due to Covid-19 restrictions face-to-face training is currently not possible, therefore, we plan to roll out a series of online training events, videos and other interactive tools that will explain how to use the database

and dashboards. If there is demand for it, and restrictions are lifted, we will also hold in-person training in due course.

### UPDATING STANDARDS

From the beginning of 2021, Bord Bia is updating its pig producer standards to include a requirement for farm biosecurity and tail biting risk assessments to be carried out annually, along with the quarterly submission of AMU data to the DAFM database. Bord Bia will also incorporate these in their future Sustainable Pig Assurance Scheme (SPAS), expected to be launched during summer 2021, which will also place greater emphasis on the role of the attending veterinary practitioner, assigning them overall responsibility for the Herd Health and Welfare Programme, including reviewing remedy use on farm. In addition, the SPAS will specify the minimum number of visits to be made each year by the attending vet to review herd health and welfare.

The veterinary assessments for both biosecurity and tail biting are provided free of charge for farmers and are funded through TASA under the Rural Development Programme, with payment made directly to the PVP following completion of the assessment/review. Only PVPs who have been trained in these assessments are funded for their delivery. AHI plan to conduct further training sessions on these and other activities in the pig sector in 2021.

**To register your interest in this training, or to book a place, please enter your details at:**

**<https://portal.animalhealthireland.ie/traineoi/>**



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