

Animal Health Plans for Organic Livestock Farms

A new service offered by the Organic Advisory Service

By Malla Hovi, University of Reading

According to the new EU regulation on organic livestock production, animal health management on organic farms should be based on prevention of disease. The focus is on selection of appropriate breeds, species-specific husbandry methods, high quality feed combined with regular exercise and access to pasturage and maintenance of appropriate stocking densities. In order to give guidance on how to implement these general principles on farm level, the draft UKROFS Standards state that a plan should be "agreed between the farmer and a nominated veterinary surgeon to develop and operate an organic livestock system". The purpose of this plan is to "ensure the development of a pattern of health building and disease control measures appropriate to the particular circumstances of the individual farm and allow the evolution of a farming system progressively less dependent on allopathic veterinary medicinal inputs".

The new UKROFS Standards require an animal or livestock health plan. Some certifying bodies have already issued general guidelines on how to approach the development of an animal health plan (OF&G, SOPA). Within the next year, all existing and converting organic livestock farms and all farms starting their conversion should have an animal health plan in place.

Whilst compliance with the organic standards is the cornerstone of organic production, the process of establishing a health plan on the farm should not be seen as another exercise to satisfy the "inspectorate". A well-designed and implemented animal health plan is an excellent management tool that can save both money and time once established.

But where to start? The farm's own veterinary surgeon should be the first person to be approached as he has both historic and current understanding of the farm's animal health status. The British Cattle Veterinary Association has developed a Herd Health Plan that, with some modification, could serve as a model for an "organic" herd health plan. Similarly, specialist pig or poultry veterinarians would be able to offer existing models of health plans for these species. If the farm's own vet, however, is unsure of the requirements of the organic standards or is unwilling to get involved in the

work, the Organic Advisory Service has developed an Animal Health Plan that is now offered as a separate service to their clients. OAS advisors are keen to collaborate with the farm's own vet on this but will also assist farms that do not have a close relationship with a local veterinarian. The main objectives of the OAS animal health plan are:

- To provide a standard animal health plan for all organic livestock producers, so they are compliant with the EU and UKROFS livestock regulations/standard requirements;
- To ensure compliance with best livestock practices and to promote positive and 'holistic' animal health and welfare;
- To monitor animal health and welfare status of organic livestock and preventive and curative methods used in order to ensure the development of pattern of health building and disease control measures that allow for evolution of a system that is progressively less dependent on allopathic veterinary medicinal products;
- To provide the farmer, the herdsman/ shepherds and the veterinarian, in whose care the animals are, a useful tool to help them in their efforts to improve animal health and welfare on the farm; and
- To provide the organic inspectors with a useful tool in the measurement and evaluation of health and welfare status of organic livestock farms.

Setting up of an animal health plan includes two stages. Initially, livestock numbers, existing husbandry systems and methods, including routine medications and procedures, farm health security standards and recording system for disease and treatments are evaluated and areas where changes need to be implemented are identified. Based on a reliable method of estimation of the disease situation on the farm, disease problems or conditions that are considered to have an effect on the welfare status of the herd/flock are also identified, and a health plan and disease level targets for the next 12 months are established (e.g. it is decided that the prevalence of lameness will be reduced by 10% by improving lameness scoring and by implementing routine foot trimming in a sheep flock). This first stage of the establishment of an animal health plan can often be carried out during one farm visit, particularly if the farm already has a good, existing herd/flock health recording system.

The second stage of the animal health plan is a continuous monitoring phase, which includes annual or twice yearly visits by the farm's veterinarian or the OAS advisor. During these visits, agreed monitoring and evaluation procedures will be carried out (calculation of disease parameters from recorded information, conditions scoring, locomotion scoring, animal welfare evaluation etc.) and new targets for the next monitoring interval will be set. This way the animal health plan becomes a dynamic document that changes continuously as the health situation of the herd/flock improves. The plan also provides the herds person/shepherd and the farm management useful feedback on the impact of the changes in husbandry methods, housing or treatment/prevention strategies that have been implemented on the farm. If you are interested in the OAS Animal Health Plan and would like an OAS advisor to help you and your vet to establish the plan on your farm, contact Peter Steggall on 01488 657600.

Malla Hovi, DVM Msc MRCVS, has recently joined the Organic Advisory Service livestock team. She brings unique qualities as a qualified vet with great practical application combined with a knowledge of organic animal management gained through the research work she has been undertaking in her position as Research Fellow at the University of Reading. Malla will be developing Animal Health Plans and providing on farm advice on specific health related issues such as resolving a persistent mastitis problem, identifying an appropriate vaccination programme or dealing with general management issues.

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