

# Animal health plans

## Making plans



**Jim Swanson and Jane Wilson, Grazing Animals Project, look at animal health plans and the mutual benefits for animals, owners, vets and consumers.**

### Introduction

Animal health planning is not just about disease prevention and keeping disease out of your holding, it is about bringing together good animal husbandry and positive animal health in a proactive approach to farm health. It provides a practical and cost effective way forward for your holding while taking account of existing management practice and objectives as well as specific needs for the future.

Animal health plans are a recommendation of the *Infectious Diseases in Livestock* report published in 2002 after the foot and mouth disease outbreak in 2001. *The Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock* (2003) also recommends a written health and welfare programme for each species and breed on a holding. This health plan should be developed with the help of your veterinary surgeon and reviewed and updated annually. Animal health plans are already

a requirement for registered organic livestock units, certain Farm Assurance Schemes (eg, EFSIS-FABBL) and are also a recommendation for the Single Payment Scheme.

Key benefits of having an animal health plan are:

- An ability to identify diseases on the farm and find cost effective ways to control them;
- Identifying and reducing the risk of introducing new diseases and infections;
- Using the best medicines for disease control;
- Improving health and welfare for the animals;
- Improving profits;
- Improving relations with your vet;
- Improving buyer and consumer confidence.

You can draw up your own plan but the best animal health plans will be made in conjunction with your vet. For

holdings in animal health schemes and organic units, they have to be drawn up in consultation with your own vet.

An appraisal by your vet may take between an hour to an hour and a half, either on farm premises or in the surgery. Aspects considered will be the general regime in place on the holding, housing for stock, the type of land and forage available, animals and species, their products and reproductive cycle, feed stuffs and record keeping, management and diseases and who works with the stock. An on farm premises appraisal might also include initial blood testing for disease and minerals or faecal samples for worm egg counts to establish levels of internal parasites.

Each appraisal will take into account any animal health schemes appropriate to your holding and focus on animal husbandry skills, pasture management to prevent

disease and reduce routine use of medicines or anthelmintics and takes into account movement regulations, veterinary medicine regulations (all keepers of farm animals are required to keep a record of veterinary medicines bought and used) and quarantine requirements for stock returning from shows or newly purchased stock. Bio-security is an important element in disease control and prevention.

A farm health plan is a reference document for everyone dealing with your stock throughout the year. An additional calendar can be drawn up as a quick reference to specify the month, week or day when a management task is due to be carried out or when stock are due to reproduce.

Conservation organisations can specify the requirement for an animal health plan in their overall grazing policy.

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This can cover everything relating to their livestock and grazing operation from specific site management objectives to compliance with health and welfare regulations.

Every holding and livestock system is different, as are individual management objectives; therefore every plan will be different.

The new animal health plan will save you money on unnecessary drug use and supplementary feed. You may want to ask whether you need to use some of those 'routine' drugs! The classic example would be routine use of wormers where poor technique and under dosing will contribute to the problem of anthelmintic resistance. In 1991, 23% of sheep farms had resistance to Benzimidazole (white) drenches; in 2000 this had risen to 59%. There are many things that can be done to reduce worm burdens. For example, as mentioned above, faecal egg counts to monitor worm burdens. Importantly, are there changes you can make to the management system you use.

The new health plan is a continual, objective appraisal of your livestock system leading to improvements in performance, cost savings and increased skills of staff. There is nothing wrong with reappraising your stock and their management and seeking advice from others on a regular basis. Sometimes it can be difficult to see problems! Problems that a fresh pair of eyes will notice!

There are computer software programmes on the market to help you with herd or flock management. The farming press carries advertisements for them and livestock shows often have system demonstrations.

Key elements of the animal health plan will be:

- Stock details – species, breed and number, plus sex and age profiles, where they are bought and sold.



*One of the key benefits of having an animal health plan is identifying and reducing the risk of introducing new diseases and infections.*

- Environment – type of farm and forage available. Buildings available for stock and feed storage.

- Nutrition – feeding regime throughout the year including trace elements and supplements.

Recommendations for condition scoring to assess nutritional status.

- Labour – details of the staff working with the animals will include staff who are full time, part time or those who work on a casual basis.

- Economics – details of livestock and products produced.

- Legislation – details of medicines used, purchase, storage and disposal. Disposal of sharps and animal carcasses. Feed storage and mixing regulations.

- Standard operating procedures – at lambing/calving/farrowing time and throughout the year.

- Diseases – diagnosis, control and prevention. A list of routine treatments that are used and under what circumstances, especially preventative management (eg, vaccinations, clean worm strategies) and the clinical treatments that would be used to deal with specific problems. A list of any diseases or illnesses that have presented problems in the past on the holding, and could cause a problem in the future, what treatments were used and their effectiveness and include future intended treatments or actions to avoid

the disease. Tackle the most prevalent and costly diseases first.

- Internal and external parasites – diagnosis, control and prevention. Strategies and management/husbandry practices based on organism life cycles and disease epidemiology/factors.

- Domestic livestock – Always take into account dogs and cats on the premises and how

they can spread disease to farm livestock!

Above all, try to keep it simple, practical and achievable!

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Email info@woolcount.co.uk