

After the Brexit: Where will UK pig production go?

For health expert David Burch, it came as a huge surprise that a majority of UK voters chose to leave the European Union in a referendum held last month. What will this mean for Britain's pig industry, he wonders?

To say it was a huge surprise is an understatement. It was more like a shock of disbelief. I have indeed been a major critic of EU legislation and bureaucracy but naively thought this would change and improve, especially after the massive migration mess last year, which highlighted the great divides between member states and the lack of a joined-up, effective EU policy.

I strongly believe that images of this, plus uncontrolled EU migration had a major impact on UK voters at a grass-roots level. The British economy has recovered well since the financial crisis of 2008 and kept its unemployment rate low, this has made it attractive for labour to move to the UK from the EU and other countries and this has helped the economy recover and grow, in spite of our ageing population.



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New labour in agriculture and services

Much of the new labour was involved in agriculture and services, competing for local jobs. Not being bound to the Euro currency also helped a great deal to stabilise the local economy. Our best pig profitable years were when the British pound went down against the Euro in 2009 and 2010 and we could compete with Danish and Dutch imports. The supermarkets actually wanted UK pork because it was cheaper.

This may well happen again soon.

IPVS & ESPHM congress, Dublin, Ireland

The recent combined [International Pig Veterinary Society \(IPVS\) Congress](#) and European Symposium of Porcine Health Management highlighted the benefits in being involved in close associations.

I have been attending IPVS congresses since Copenhagen in 1980 and it is amazing the friends and colleagues that you continue to meet up with over the years. I hope this will continue, as it is a great opportunity to exchange ideas and knowledge to help us produce pigs more healthily and efficiently without damaging their welfare. I hope that Brexit will not impact this and certainly the UK vets can stay in the European College specialisation system and European Association.

Antimicrobial legislation

This is continuing steadily. The European Parliament came out with some totally impractical ideas, led by COMENVI (Environment Committee) in the Veterinary Products Legislation e.g.

(34a) The routine prophylactic and metaphylactic use of antimicrobials on groups of food-producing animals should be brought to an end. Disease should be prevented not by routine recourse to antimicrobials but by good hygiene, husbandry and housing, and sound management practices.

Prophylactic use is not being supported but metaphylactic use is considered likely to remain alongside therapeutic use, as it means animals are starting to be ill and therefore require prompt veterinary treatment.

Use of antibiotics in drinking water

4b. The use of antibiotics in drinking water shall be restricted to cases where most of the animals or the whole herd are sick.

From a veterinary and welfare perspective, this is ridiculous. Sick animals and those potentially in contact with them need to be treated as soon as possible not wait until most are ill. It is hoped that the national authorities through the European Council and European Commission will sort out these nonsensical issues.

The Medicated Feed Law is also progressing under COMAGRI (Agriculture Committee) and is making steady progress. It is much less controversial but they want it to be approved at the same time as the Veterinary Products Legislation. They are currently relaxing their stance on **Carryover** of antibiotics to following feeds which is 3% but originally proposed to be 1% and even 0.1%, both of which were impractical and impossible to achieve commercially. Each product will be assessed on its own merits by EFSA.

Permitted **tolerances** of antibiotic recovery when the feed is tested has also been relaxed, again at 10% it was not practical, due to test method, recovery from feed and also variability of sampling. This has been relaxed depending on the concentration in the feed up to 35% at <10 ppm. all of this could change but at the moment it is workable.>

Advice regarding colistin

The EMA's (European Medicines Agency) Antimicrobial Advice Expert Group (AMEG) has revised their advice regarding the use of colistin in all animal species and it is out for consultation following a detailed review of published information:

Risk management measures

In its updated advice, AMEG recommends that member states should reduce the use of colistin to a maximum level of 5 mg colistin/PCU (population correction unit) and consider setting stricter national targets, ideally lower than 5 mg/PCU of colistin, e.g. below 1 mg/PCU as a desirable level.

The AMEG emphasises that reduction of colistin use should not be compensated for by increasing the use of other types of antimicrobials. Instead, the use of this antibiotic should be reduced through other measures such as improved farming conditions, biosecurity in between production cycles, and vaccination.

In addition, colistin should be reclassified and added to Category 2 of the AMEG classification system, which includes medicines reserved for treating infections in animals for which no effective alternative treatments exist. This category includes certain classes of antimicrobials listed by the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) as critically important to human health. Because of the risk posed to public health by their veterinary use, these medicines are subject to specific restrictions.

Incidence of resistance

It is not banned at this stage as the incidence of resistance is very low in the EU but has been made a more restricted category i.e. as a **Category 2** product, it has become of last resort, along with the fluoroquinolones and 3rd and 4th generation cephalosporins.

Interestingly, they have set targets for use based on the ESVAC calculations at 5 mg/PCU (Population Correction Unit) for high using countries, recognising that it will take some time and effort to reduce its use, potentially by 75-80% in Spain and Italy. They would like further reductions if possible across the board to 1mg/PCU. Surveillance will be introduced both for human and animal bacteria and it is interesting that antimicrobial use is being monitored also. To me this is the correct use of the antimicrobial resistance and usage monitoring schemes to make informed decisions.

Annexe 10. Risk Management options that were analysed and disregarded.

In this section of the report it demonstrates some of the thinking processes involved and gives some clearer pictures how the future EU legislation might evolve, e.g. accepting group of animals therapy; accepting metaphylaxis and therapy; retaining in-feed medication.

Future pig production

It is proposed that disease should be prevented not by routine recourse to antimicrobials but by good hygiene, husbandry and housing, and sound management practices. There is going to be increased pressure to introduce usage targets on farms. In the meantime, it gives farmers

an opportunity to eradicate infections and improve the health status of their herds; to improve bio-security, to keep diseases out of the farm and to reduce them spreading in the farm or group; to try improving vaccination programmes. These are the tried and tested methods to improve pig health and reduce antimicrobial use.

Conclusions

After the shock of the Brexit vote, I am not sure what will happen in the future here. All I know is that I have worked in the EU, the former Eastern Europe countries or for European companies for the last 37 years and have thoroughly enjoyed the work, the company and the many friendships that have been built up over these years.

I hope the European Commission and the remaining member states will look on us in the UK still favourably in the future negotiations and that we can come to an amicable and mutually beneficial cooperation, especially over pig health management.

David Burch

Blog: Pig health

Pig Progress