

Development of animal health and welfare planning in organic dairy farming in Europe

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Abstract

Good animal health and welfare is an explicit goal of organic livestock farming, and will need continuous development and adjustment on the farms. Furthermore, the very different conditions in different regions of Europe calls for models that can be integrated into local practice and be relevant for each type of farming context. A European project with participants from seven countries have been established with the aim of developing principles for animal health and welfare planning in organic dairy farming, based on a process where knowledge about the status within a given herd will be included as background for taking decisions and planning future improvements. An important part of the planning process is communication with other farmers as well as animal health and welfare professionals (veterinarians and advisors). Other principles such as systematic evaluation of how the improvements work in the farm ensure the continuity of the planning process. This presentation gives an overview over the current animal health and welfare planning initiatives in the participating countries and lines up the principles which are being gradually implemented in partner countries in collaboration with groups of organic farmers and organisations.

Introduction

Livestock farming is an important part of organic farming systems, and it is an explicit goal of organic farming to ensure high levels of animal health and welfare (AHW) through proactive and appropriate management of breeding, feeding, housing and species specific husbandry. A goal in organic livestock farming is to minimise the use of veterinary medicines to improve food quality and protect the environment, and to do this by improving livestock living conditions rather than using alternative medical treatments. Key values influencing organic livestock production are naturalness, harmony at all levels of production, use and recirculation of local resources and the precautionary principle. The concepts of "positive health and welfare" are incorporated in EU Regulation 2092/91 on organic production. The farmer must ensure that farm animals as much as possible can perform natural behaviours and live natural lives, but at the same time he/she must intervene when necessary and at first signs of disharmony in the herd.

High levels of AHW are not guaranteed merely by farming to organic standards. This is a conclusion from two EU network projects, "Network for Animal Health and Welfare in Organic Agriculture (NAHWOA)", and "Sustaining Animal Health and Welfare in Organic Farming" (SAFO). Therefore, both networks recommended implementation of farm individual animal health plans to make organic farmers work towards AHW

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promotion and disease prevention. A good planning process of animal health and welfare should be built on an identification of the current state of the art in the particular herd and farm, and the farmer's own prioritisation of what issues should be worked with at the farm. One very relevant way of gaining insight into the herd's current state is to carry through an animal health and welfare assessment. Systems aiming at assessing animal health and welfare have been developed and used in organic dairy herds in the UK, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Norway and Denmark, e.g., in research and development projects or in relation to certification.

If animal health plans are to gain widespread use among organic farmers, communication with the farmer community is crucial. A creative dialogue with the individual farmer is also necessary when identifying goals and planning how to reach them. Communication regarding the role and benefits of benchmarking or AHW assessment systems may be the catalyst needed to get farmers thinking about health and welfare planning. It can take place within health advisory systems or in farmer groups. Current research and development activities in Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, and the Netherlands show the benefits of such a dialogue.

Based on these various project experiences and results and research questions from different European countries, a research project titled 'Minimising medicine use in organic dairy herds through animal health and welfare planning', with the acronym ANIPLAN, was initiated in mid-2007 with the aim as indicated in the title. The aim of this presentation is to present the project and the first results of the work towards an identification of what is an animal health and welfare plan, and a development of common principles for animal health and welfare planning in a diverse, European context.

Presentation of the project

The main aim of the project is to minimise medicine use in organic dairy herds through active and well planned animal health and welfare promotion and disease prevention. This objective is met through the following intermediate objectives:

Develop animal health and welfare planning principles for organic dairy farms under diverse conditions based on an evaluation of current experiences.

Application of animal health and welfare assessment based on the WelfareQuality parameters in different types of organic dairy herds across Europe. This will result in an overview of the herds and allow for potential adaptations for the organic situation (e.g. pasture systems, longer cow/calf contact). For calves, a special system will be developed by the Norwegian partners, and combined and tested together with the WelfareQuality assessment system.

Develop guidelines for communication about animal health and welfare promotion in different settings. This can be part of existing animal health advisory services or farmer groups such as the Danish Stable School system and the Dutch network program.

The ANIPLAN project aims at minimising medicine use in organic dairy farming through animal health and welfare promotion in ways which meet the common organic goals and at the same time is adjusted to the individual farm context. This calls for an on-farm approach, and a strong collaboration with the end-user environment. The participating institutions in this project come from Austria, Switzerland, UK, Norway, The Netherlands, Germany and Denmark, and they all have a strong on-farm research

and development experience and focus, and our common research facilities are the private farms. We aim to combine epidemiological research based on farm-data, different qualitative research approaches and systemic thinking seem to be well implemented in all institutions, and we all seem to work with topics which are related to the ANIPLAN project. The research approach will basically be action research oriented.

Animal health and welfare plans and planning

The starting point: what is the current state of art in Europe regarding animal health and welfare plans?

Perspectives on animal health plans and animal health planning in the UK form a starting point for this project, since animal health plans are mandatory in UK. In no other participating countries than the UK, formalised animal health planning is taking place. This does not mean that organic dairy farmers do not work with animal health and welfare in a more or less systematic way. Various approaches to the assessment of animal health and welfare specifically for organic animals have also been taken in Norway, The Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Likewise, initiatives to farmer group formation and animal health advice through veterinary practices have been taken in many places. Much of the ANIPLAN project is based on national on-going activities, and is designed to transfer, jointly analyse and discuss the results of this work.

A clear difference between animal health plans and planning

One key point that became strongly apparent based on experiences from UK is that there is a big difference between the on-farm presence of an animal health and welfare plan versus animal health and welfare planning. The first is viewed by many farmers solely as a 'document', where the latter is the process involving the farmer in making a plan for improvements in the herd and implementation of this plan. In this project, we focus on the animal health and welfare process.

Dealing with diversity

In this project, very different farming conditions are represented – e.g. from mono-cultural intensive and high yield production in Danish, Dutch, German and British farms to alpine farming in Austria and Switzerland, as well as mountain farming in Norway. We aim at developing concepts which refer to the organic principles and ideas and at the same time possible to adjust to national conditions. This is a part of the working conditions for research and for daily practice in the farming systems – since we are partners from so many different countries – and as such a challenge. Clearly, each project participant is responsible for create the connection between the national organic dairy farming environment and judge what is possible there, and the project group, so that no principles are included in the common platform, if they are not approved and thought into the national conditions. This should be seen as a great advantage for the project outcome, since the common developed principles are then tested possible to use under many different conditions.

Animal welfare assessment as a part of animal health planning

The various elements of the project all form parts of an animal health and welfare planning process. A plan necessarily has to be based on knowledge of the animal health and welfare status on the farm, and therefore tools for assessing animal health and welfare on-farm have to be well developed and trained. In this project, a number

of parameters from the European project WelfareQuality will be applied, including management information, assessment of the housing system, clinical conditions of the cows and behavioural observations both on individual level (e.g. flight distance to humans) and flock level (social behaviour and interactions). It also has to be evaluated, in order to find out whether the planned and implemented improvements on the farm work in the way they were expected, and in order to ensure continuous improvements.

Communication about animal health and welfare a part of a planning process

Communication is considered a necessary part of making an animal health and welfare plan; the farmer needs to direct the process him- or herself, but will also need to be challenged, have the right questions at the right time and to be stimulated and guided at times. Therefore, one of the work packages in this project aims at identifying appropriate ways of communicating in relation to the animal health and welfare plan.

Development of common principles

It is a vision of this project to develop a process of animal health and welfare planning which can be implemented in all different types of farming environments, e.g. large scale dairy farming as well as alpine, smallholder and diverse farming systems. By developing a method of analysing the context of the farming environment, and include this in the process of animal health and welfare planning, we hope and expect that other research groups and countries outside the partnership in this project also can benefit from research results. The national teams feed the acquired knowledge back to their national partners, and the European (and international) community benefit from the joint effort to develop practices, which meet core areas of organic livestock production (animal health and welfare through non-medical approaches). In the project, the development of common principles for the animal health and welfare planning process have started and will be further developed and adjusted along the project, based on practical experience from the dialogue with farmer groups in different parts of Europe. Furthermore, an active process will build on the establishment of a dialogue with external partners, and this could be advisors, veterinarians or other fellow farmers. Based on experience, farmer ownership is identified as another crucial principle of any on-farm planning process.

In conclusion

Whilst the necessity for a form of health planning on organic farms is recognised, the means by which this is best achieved is still under development and discussion. Formal health plans provide a framework, but these require a sense of farmer ownership and need to reflect actual farm and regional variation. Further, there is a requirement for dialogue in order to achieve a balance between farmer needs, animal needs and the wider societal perception of health and welfare whilst also satisfying the multiple objectives of organic farming. During the course of the collaborative project it is envisaged that practical and research experiences from a range of European settings will contribute to this process of development and discussion with the aim of providing clear guidelines for the use of animal health and welfare plans on organic farms.