

How can we tell when our pigs are healthy?

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It is a simple enough question. Surely, pigs are healthy if they are not affected by disease. But is it that easy? How sure are we that we can diagnose disease with such certainty that this uncomplicated definition of 'healthy' will be adequate?

A completely different, but rather more pragmatic, approach would be to declare pigs healthy if their producer makes a profit when they are sold for slaughter or for breeding.

You see – we are already on a slippery slope, trying to define 'healthy' to fit in with our existing requirements and preconceptions.

However, when we try to define it there are very many factors which contribute to the health of a pig. In this article, we will cover a number of these variables. And with the increasing level of competition, countrywide and internationally, we may find that a definition of 'healthy' we once found acceptable, might well not be good enough for the future.

Health and performance

We are all aware that good health translates into good performance. But how do we decide what good performance means?

Firstly, there is information from the breeding companies about the genetic potential of pigs from their own programmes. Then, there are figures for daily weight gain to be compared with different ingredients from different feed suppliers.

These provide benchmark figures we can at least aim at, though we all know that it is often very difficult to achieve such results under field conditions. What are the reasons we so often fail to reach these targets? The list of relevant factors is just about endless.

It is rather more realistic to compare production figures with other local producers. National meat boards often provide their members with the average production parameters for the whole country, for example. More useful as target values, however, might be the production parameters of the top 20% of producers in a given region or coun-



try, and some meat boards do quote these figures.

Why is this so important? Well, as we know, the number of farms is declining each year. There may be many reasons to stop producing pigs, but often it is simply because a farmer's production figures are not good enough, or not competitive enough, to stay in business.

So to stay in the market, the first thing he needs to know is how well he is performing against his competitors, or better still, against the best of his competitors.

Secondly, because of the constant need to re-invest in the business, producers need production benchmarks against which they can judge whether or not their investment is showing worthwhile results.

But, here again, there are plenty of variables to confuse the picture – not least the market price for pig meat, or for breeding animals. Price can vary tremendously in different countries, and it cannot be influenced by a single producer or even a group of pig farmers acting together.

There are times when healthy animals do not actually equate to healthy profits; there are even periods when the poorest producers still manage to make a living, but they tend to be the exception rather than the rule. Better to focus on measures responsible producers can take.

There are, perhaps, three important factors to consider if we want to stay in business:

- Keep pace with developments, and stay well ahead of competitors who operate at the lowest level.
- Analyse every investment carefully beforehand, whether it is new machinery, equipment or a disease intervention strategy.
- Record production parameters before and after the implementation of any investment in order to check on your return.

Much the same applies to disease management. You need to be sure to keep up to date with the changes in existing diseases and their control, as well, of course, with information on emerging pathogens. A lot can be learned from the experience of others; one important lesson being that 'healthy', under practical conditions, is usually a compromise between maximum and optimum.

But it is, nonetheless, essential to analyse your own figures so that you can compare them against other similar enterprises in the industry.

ResPig program

It is this analysis which can be so useful in judging the effectiveness of intervention strategies. There are several computer aided programs available to help the pig producer with the analysis, but none of them as detailed as the ResPig program currently on trial in several countries.

The ResPig program takes you firstly through a detailed audit of

your farm, including multiple aspects of management and disease, and the resulting data are stored via the internet on a secure central computer. This means that participating veterinarians can enter or access data wherever there is an internet connection.

When the audit is complete, an assessment is generated of the importance of various diseases, which is then input into the economic model, the second important pillar supporting the ResPig program. Based on input from the audit and the impact of certain diseases, the model calculates which intervention strategies are possible, and ranks them in terms of value.

The veterinarian and the farmer together, can then make reasoned decisions on which intervention strategy to implement for best results. Some time later, the audit is repeated, looking at the same parameters and analysing the differences. These results are then stored on the central computer to be used as a reference for the future.

Using this structured approach and limiting the number of variables, much better information is generated on which to take the decisions in the face of the respiratory disease situation which is constantly becoming more complex and difficult to address.

Making use of modern electronic systems, and compliance with data protection legislation means that the records are only accessible to registered and relevant persons, wherever they happen to be.

The answer to the question 'How can we tell when our pigs are healthy?' depends very much on the quality of the information on which we base our judgment.

ResPig helps in gathering and analysing this data to the benefit of the decision making process in designing and evaluating intervention strategies for individual enterprises.

Benchmarks available to the industry are all very well, but we know that different farms require different approaches. So it is very much a question of – 'Who needs what to raise healthy pigs?' – and ResPig can help provide the answer. ■