

XLVets Submission to the National Farmed Animal Strategy Consultation Process

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Introduction

XLVets congratulates DAFM on the publication of a comprehensive and thoughtful consultation document on a National Farmed Animal Health Strategy and we are pleased to have the opportunity to make this submission.

Launched in 2010, the guiding mission of XLVets is to *“consistently deliver the highest standards of animal care and health management through clinical excellence”*. The future of agriculture needs a healthy industry which needs healthy farm animals. Operating through a national network of 24 veterinary practices, with 130 veterinarians and reaching over 17,000 farmers; XLVets is committed to supporting this healthy future for the farmed animal sector.

Economic Importance of the Farmed Animal Sector

As the consultation document highlights, farming is playing a leading role in Ireland’s national recovery. In looking to the future: Ireland’s national agri-food strategy document, Food Wise 2025 (2015) predicts:

- The value of Ireland’s agrifood exports will be €19bn in 2025 (currently €10.5bn)
- The value of farm gate primary production will be €10bn in 2025 (currently €7bn)
- An additional 23,000 direct jobs will be created across the agri-food supply chain by 2025.

Significantly, the Food Wise document also acknowledges the challenges faced by the agri-food sector in Ireland because of the *“skills gaps which must be filled across the sector, up and down the supply and value chains to enable the potential of the sector to be realised”* (p45).

Miller et al (2012) quantify this potential by predicting a jobs boost of between 18,990 and 38,443 full-time positions as a result of increased agri-food output by 2020. The reason for the very high jobs multiplier effect is that agriculture procures 71% of its raw materials and services from domestic suppliers, compared with 44% for other manufacturing.

Learning and Development in the Farmed Animal Sector

Building the skills base at farm level for maintaining healthy herds and emphasising preventative approaches, is absolutely fundamental to hitting these employment numbers. Unhealthy herds are neither environmentally efficient nor conducive to supporting animal welfare. Curative therapies depress output, compromise food safety and are an exacerbation to the challenges posed by anti-microbial resistance. These issues are highly relevant to the food-purchasing choices of discerning consumers in an increasingly competitive market environment.

While we welcome the acknowledgment given in the strategy document to the requirement for further systemisation of data gathering and knowledge creation through more coordinated surveillance; XLVets holds the view that more information and knowledge alone is not sufficient to adequately support farming and make it more competitive in an international trading environment. XLVets believes that it is the habitual implementation of information and knowledge in the form of best practice that makes the vital difference and that creates a sustainable competitive advantage.

Human Capital versus Knowledge Capital

In support of this view, the consultancy company McKinsey & Co. (2013) found that there is a *“40% greater return from investment in human capital rather than knowledge capital”*. The finding supports the view that investment in human capital, such as management skills, business processes, organisational structure and operational models creates assets that are difficult to replicate, that lead to significant competitive advantage and therefore higher marginal returns. The point is that if we fail to invest in human capital, the potential gains from knowledge capital become difficult to capture. This is because the implementation of knowledge requires the human capability to adapt and to change routines and behaviours; which isn't always easily done.

It is in this regard that XLVets has launched a number of developmental initiatives, in partnership with Skillnets, that are clearly differentiated from the passive approach of

simply collating more knowledge, making more information available and then 'hoping for the best'.

Our developmental strategy for the farmed animal sector has two primary components. First the VetSkills program is positioned to train and upskill the veterinary sector in the clinical, business management and communication skills required to meet the development needs (as opposed to the service needs) of the farming sector. As a result, 36 of our member veterinary surgeons have completed a Train the Trainer program, 21 have completed or are undertaking a Post Graduate Certificate Program in Dairy Herd Health and 54 have participated in Executive Coaching workshops. This investment in human capital has enabled XLVets to engage collaboratively and cohesively with the farmed animal through our FarmSkills programs.

In 2015/16 as part of our FarmSkills program we held 57 one-day on-farm training events to deliver a unique style of on-farm, practical skills development to small groups of farmers. Targeting specific themes [e.g. accelerated dairy heifer performance, fertility management, bovine mobility etc...] farmers learned specific skills that are timely, implementable, relevant and practical. Furthermore, we organised our trainee groups according to their career stage (e.g. new entrants to dairying and farmers converting from beef to dairy) and the feedback suggests this approach further enhanced trainees' learning experience.

Enabling Veterinary to Respond

Farmers' needs are changing and we agree with the consultation document that veterinary businesses must respond. Veterinary surgeons are generally excellent at providing a continuous emergency response service. However, the growing requirement for routine/scheduled veterinary visits to support disease preventative strategies, pose a challenge for practices' operational model. It is difficult for small veterinary practices to organise their resources so that it is feasible for them to offer emergency services and scheduled services side-by-side.

In 2014/15, XLVets piloted a Herd Fertility Program with 23 farmers. The purpose of the program was twofold; first to assess the value impact of a season long fertility management plan at farm level and second to quantify the challenge at practice level to deliver such a service while maintaining the capability to provide emergency cover. The findings of the program were evaluated by the UCD School of Veterinary Science and Teagasc and have pushed forward our collective viewpoint on the competitive position of alternative veterinary service delivery models.

To address the ongoing challenge of increasing the adoption of best practice routines at farm-level, XLVets believes a more supportive style of intervention at farm-level is required. Therefore, in 2015, we launched the XLVets DairyMentor program with disease prevention and nutrition management strands. The purpose of the program is to move beyond the communication of facts and best practice and to engage with farmers at a much deeper level to better embed the adoption of best practice routines on-farm.

Designing this concept and rolling it out has surfaced a number of key learning points on how to effect change at farm-level. We were delighted earlier this year when the Irish institute for Training and Development recognised XLVets Skillnet as Ireland's best Learning and Development Network on foot of the innovative knowledge transfer approach in the XLVets DairyMentor program.

Our client research indicates that for 35% of the farmers we serve, the veterinary surgeon is the primary source of external expertise with whom they have regular contact. This indicates that veterinary surgeons are uniquely positioned to support the implementation of a sector-wide farmed animal strategy.

Recommendations

With what is written above in mind and based on our experience of working in a developmental capacity with the sector to date, XLVets is offering the following recommendations to National Farmed Animal Strategy consultation process:

1. Include measures within the strategy that will facilitate and incentivise greater integration and consolidation within the veterinary sector so as to foster a more systematic and scalable route for the veterinary sector to engage with the farmed animal sector in a developmental capacity.
2. Leverage the capability and experience of existing networks of veterinary practices possessing a proven collaborative capability to assist with the devising and the implementation of targeted surveillance programs.
3. A national benchmark and target for total anti-microbial usage in the farmed animal sector should be set on a rolling basis and linked to a veterinary surgeon led national training program for farmers on the appropriate use of veterinary medicine and herd health planning.
4. Create a sector wide enabling mechanism to support veterinary surgeons working directly with farmers on the ongoing implementation and performance monitoring of disease preventative on-farm routines and regimens.
5. Make provision for veterinary surgeons, veterinary laboratories and farmers to collaborate on the gathering of national prevalence data for key disease risk organisms including ticks, fluke and other pathogens for the purpose of developing an evidence-based and regionally focused disease risk mitigation strategy.

Bibliography

- (1) Miller, A.C, A Matthews, T. Donnellan and C. O'Donoghue (2012) *The Employment effects of Food Harvest 2020 in Ireland* Teagasc submission to the DAFM Working Group of Employment Numbers in the Agri-Food Sector
- (2) McKinsey & Company (2013) *Innovation matters; reviving the growth engine*
- (3) Department of Agriculture Food & Marine (2015) *Food Wise 2025: A 10 year vision for the Irish agri-food industry*