



Get ahead of the flock with web health plan tool

Keeping livestock is all about juggling risk factors and having a flexible health plan with regular input from your vet can help you manage these risks. **Gemma Mackenzie** reports

Beef and sheep producers are benefiting from a data-driven online health-planning programme, which aims to replace the traditional once-a-year farm health-planning visits, with a more “dynamic” and flexible approach.

The Animal Health Planning Programme, from the Scottish Agricultural College, is available free to Scottish livestock producers and is now available to producers in England, Wales and Ireland at a moderate cost.

Programme co-ordinator Lindsay Eaglesham says it offers a “more dynamic and proactive approach to animal health” and is an effective way for vet advice to be delivered to the farmer.

“The idea is that it’s a data-driven

programme, whereby producers and their vets can look for shortfalls in physical performance and put protocols in place that are specific to that flock or herd. We collect data which enables key performance indicators to be identified and monitored, meaning vet advice can be targeted with the aim of optimising performance,” she adds.

Vet Lee-Anne Oliver from Scott Mitchell Associates, Hexham, Northumberland, has been using the system since spring last year and says it has been a good tool for helping farmers get to grips with issues such as sheep scab and Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD).

“It has really helped move health planning on from a once-a-year service as we are now doing a consultancy service. It also gets us on

The Animal Health Planning Programme can be used to target health issues in sheep flocks and cattle herds.

CASE STUDY

Beamwham Farm

NORTHUMBERLAND

* Upgrading his existing health plan to a flexible online system seemed like the next step forward for Alan Dent at Beamwham Farm, Haydon Bridge, Northumberland.

Mr Dent, who keeps 85 cows and 750 breeding ewes, says the new health-planning tool has helped him achieve a “prevention is better than cure” ethos on the farm.

“We use the system quite a bit with the cows, and as a result we are now using more vaccines to prevent problems rather than curing them with antibiotics,” he says.

“I think antibiotics are going to become a very big problem in the future, so if we can reduce their use by using vaccines for prevention it is good. Prevention is always better than cure.”

This approach has been

especially relevant in youngstock management and vaccinating against pneumonia (see www.fwi.co.uk/stoptheloss for more information on calf rearing).

Mr Dent adds: “With our sheep, since we have had the health plan in place we have used less wormers, which has saved us a big cost. Because once you cost in your time, it all adds up.”

In all, he says the online health-planning system has given him a “basic idea” of what he needs to improve on in his farming enterprise and the opportunity to discuss with his vet how to prevent problems before they happen.

“Hopefully in the long run this will help us save money. I don’t know if it would suit everyone, but I think people are going to have to start looking down this route to be more cost-effective,” he adds.

farm a lot more, because before many farmers were looking after a lot of animal health problems themselves,” she says.

“Farmers really like one-to-one advice. It’s all to do with education, and we explain things such as BVD, parasite control and worming on sheep farms.”

As part of the system, Mrs Oliver

goes on farm and discusses with the farmer what they are doing. She then gathers performance data, identifies areas for improvement and puts together the health plan online, as well as sending out a summary.

“The aim is that we keep up to date with the plan throughout the year, by giving the farmers phone calls. All the vets are allocated →p42



REX

The online health planning programme has helped producers get to grips with problems such as Bovine Viral Diarrhoea.

their farmers and are responsible for the preventative medical treatment on those farms," adds Mrs Oliver.

She says it is particularly beneficial when explaining the threat of BVD to farmers and has proved useful in tackling sheep scab by incorporating a group farm treatment approach across those farms using the health-planning system.

"We try to do the health plans in a certain area all at once, and in one area we have been able to speak to

all the farmers and try to get them all treating their sheep for scab at the same time."

In addition to vet input, there is the option to allow consultants, nutritionists and other key farm advisors to have access to the health-planning programme, says Ms Eaglesham.

"It's important to remember it's a web-based health plan, meaning it's a living document that can be updated and consulted at any time."

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CASE STUDY

East Greenridge Farm

NORTHUMBERLAND

* Steven Smith has found the online health-planning tool beneficial for keeping on top of health problems in his herd of 100 cows and flock of 1,200 ewes at East Greenridge Farm, Hexham, Northumberland.

What's more, he says it has allowed proper one-on-one sessions with his vet, who previously only came to the farm in the event of an emergency.

"In the past on our farm when the vet came out it was only for an emergency and there was no time to sit down and talk to them. But with the health-planning system, they come out and stay all afternoon and we talk about everything," says Mr Smith.

"I always have a question for the vet and it's good having the time to sit down and talk to them. It's often the case that two heads are better than one."

He says having a health plan has been useful when approaching worm control and he hopes that by being able to save on one dose of

wormer a year, he will reduce the risk of anthelmintic resistance and save himself money.

And, taking the time to talk to his vet meant Mr Smith is now aware of the impact new Scottish BVD rules could have on his business.

"More than half of our cattle end up in Scotland, so it could potentially be a loss for us if we don't get on top of it," he says.

"I didn't know about the BVD monitoring scheme before and when the vet came out we discussed it. By talking about it and getting on top of it, hopefully we are one step ahead of some other producers."

And as well as being able to look at disease risks and problems on the whole farm, Mr Smith says the system is attractive to use because it allows him to benchmark his business against others.

"I always quite liked the idea of having a health plan, and getting an idea of how we are performing against others, without names being named."