

A Guide to Developing Animal Health Plans for Organic Livestock Units

Organic requirements are in addition to other statutory requirements
Statutory information is for guidance only and is correct at time of going to print

Introduction

One of the main aims of organic farming is to develop healthy livestock with as little recourse to veterinary medicines as possible.

An Animal Health Plan aims to reduce disease by preventive management - a positive health approach - and thus reduce the need for routine use of medicines.

An Animal Health Plan is a reference document for all personnel dealing with the farms' stock and should be kept updated. Each time an animal needs treatment, the case should be reviewed to see whether and how the need for treatment can be reduced or prevented.

As conversion progresses and the advantages of organic management start to take effect, there should be a reduction in medicine use and overall improvement in the health of the livestock.

OF&G Record sheet 17 "Animal Health Plan" in Section 6 of the OF&G Standards can help you get started. Either use the sheet as it is, or adapt it.

Disease Prevention and Veterinary Treatments (Ref: OF&G Standards Section 8.5)

Disease prevention or positive health management is based on the following:

- The selection of appropriate breeds or strains of animal that can adapt well to local conditions, have good vitality and disease resistance;
- Good husbandry, appropriate to the requirements of each type of animal, that encourages strong resistance to disease and the prevention of infections;
- The use of high quality feed and access to pasturage and regular exercise to encourage the natural immunological defence of the animal;
- An appropriate stocking density, to avoid overstocking and reduce stress

If, in spite of the above, animals become sick or injured, they must be treated immediately and in certain cases, veterinary treatments may be used. Vaccination is permitted in cases where there is a known disease risk but again, the aim must be to reduce the use of vaccination as the organic unit becomes established. Section 8.5 of the OF&G Standards gives details of permitted treatments and should be read in conjunction with this leaflet.

The Animal Health Plan should help the Livestock Keeper reduce, in a planned and careful way, the level of medicine use on the converting/organic livestock unit. Put simply you may use the appropriate veterinary treatments, given the increased withdrawal time, (Please refer to OF&G Control Manual 8.5.12) to minimise the suffering of animals but you must also look at how you can prevent the need for such treatments in the future.

Be aware that the organic standards allow only a certain number of courses of treatment before an animal loses its organic status (ref: OF&G Standards Section 8.5.23). This greatly increases the need for thorough health planning to reduce the use of treatments without increasing the risk of animals suffering or loss of organic status.

Planning for Healthy Animals on an Organic Livestock Unit.

Planning should start when the decision to convert a holding is first made. What will the production level be? How will the livestock be sold? Are the conditions suitable for the breed/type of livestock chosen? Remember that organic production is essentially an extensive system and animals may well have to be smaller to mature from forage-based systems or able to last longer to finish under organic management. If a suitable breed or type of stock is chosen for the climate, housing available, pasturage and diet to be fed, there should be less likelihood of stress and therefore disease.

Ideally a breed developed locally or in similar conditions will be chosen and replacements reared on the unit. Both of these have advantages in that the animals will be suited to the conditions and more likely to be resistant to the indigenous diseases of the unit and area. There are many more considerations but these give a taste of how all decisions affect livestock health.

Farmers know they should keep new stock isolated for a period of time in order to reduce the level of disease or parasite transmission but Staff are important as well. They are one of the major means of disease and parasite transmission within livestock units, so make sure their hygiene practices are good.

It is necessary to have a Health Plan developed by the time of the first organic Inspection and established by the time of the second Inspection. Ideally this will have been drawn up in discussion with your Vet and be updated as the animals convert to organic.

For simultaneous conversion of land and livestock, the animal health plan should be started at the beginning of the conversion period (ref: OF&G Standards Section 8.1.07).

Writing the Health Plan

First find out what you are dealing with. Look through your medicine book for the previous year and ask your Vet about locally-occurring diseases and conditions that are likely to affect your livestock. Faeces testing for your present livestock can help to identify the level and type of internal parasite burden, which you will have to plan to reduce.

Vets are the health professionals of the animal world. As well as being useful in an emergency, your Vet can help you to understand and monitor your livestock's health. The added bonus in obtaining your Vet's help in drawing up an Animal Health Plan, is that he/she will become familiar with the organic standards which will be helpful when attending cases on your farm.

Once you have the information on what presently does affect and potentially may affect your livestock then you can begin to write the Health Plan. The format suggested at the end of this leaflet is designed to be simple to use and extend as necessary. (Please see page 6 of this leaflet for a completed example for biting flies.) Writing the Health Plan is an ongoing process. Whenever an animal needs treating you must treat it, but do think about what could be done to avoid having to treat again in the future. This, written down, is your Health Plan.

Conditions like mastitis that have multiple causes need to be investigated to help the stock person to identify the main cause on your particular farm. Talk with the Vet about how management affects health and how to monitor conditions as well as how to treat clinical cases. The more objective stance of a Vet or advisor can be useful in helping you to plan what is possible immediately and in the long term.

Keep the plan where any one concerned with the livestock can consult or add to it. Keep a copy of the DEFRA Welfare Code with it so that you fulfil these requirements at the same time.

It is clear from the above that the Health Plan is not just a piece of paper for the Inspector to see, but an ongoing part of the development of an organic system on your farm.

Establishing and maintaining the Health Plan is a requirement of the OF&G Standards - it is not optional!

Practical steps to develop a Health Plan

- 1) It may be useful to ask your Vet to make a consultancy visit to discuss the establishment of the Health Plan;
- 2) Make a copy of OF&G Record Sheet 17 "Animal Health Plan" for each disease or health problem;
- 3) Identify the disease organism or health problem;
- 4) Learn about the organism's life cycle and/or the health problem;
- 5) Identify the current veterinary or other treatments used;
- 6) Think about management/husbandry practices that could be used to break the organism's lifecycle or improve the animal's health, whilst reducing reliance on veterinary treatments;
- 7) Identify management/husbandry practices or alternative therapies that could be used to minimise or reduce the problem;
- 8) Identify in advance the alternative veterinary medicines that can be used should the management practices not be successful;
- 9) Identify the specified withdrawal periods for the treatments and calculate the longer withdrawal periods required for organic management (ref: OF&G Standards Section 8.5.21);
- 10) Include the personnel who manage the stock in the process and ensure that a copy of the Health Plan is made available to them;
- 11) Monitor the effectiveness of the Health Plans with the assistance of the Vet and/or farm personnel and update them or create new plans where necessary.

The use of Alternative Therapies

Organic management encourages the use of alternative therapies, such as homeopathy, that improve the animal's ability to resist disease rather than treating the disease specifically. It's important to remember that there is a danger of misuse of alternative therapies as much as with conventional (allopathic) medicines.

Contact the professional institute for the type of therapy you're considering (eg The British Association of Homeopathic Veterinary Surgeons – see reference section below) to make sure your adviser is properly trained.

Remember to not violate the natural barriers that are there to protect the animal, namely the skin, gut and teat end sphincters. Administering any un-sterile product that has to be injected or pushed through these is dangerous. When in doubt, talk through the procedure and possible effects with a trained practitioner, before using any of these products.

Important: Drugs and alternative remedies are licensed or approved to treat specific conditions. It may be a non-compliance to use them to treat conditions for which they are not licensed or approved, unless this is done under veterinary supervision.

Some useful addresses:

British Association of Homoeopathic Veterinary Surgeons
The Alternative Veterinary Medicine Centre, Chingham House, Stanford in the Vale, Faringdon,
Oxon SN7 8NQ
Tel: 01367 710324 Fax: 01367 718243

The BAHVS can recommend trained homeopathic vets in your area and the website (www.bahvs.com) is a good starting place for information on homeopathy

Soil Association Producer Services - runs courses on all aspects of organic farming and the use of Homeopathy.

Soil Association Producer Services, South Plaza, Marlborough St., Bristol, BS1 3NX.
Tel: 0117 914 2400 Fax: 0117 925 2504 E-mail : ps@soilassociation.org

A sample of the wide range of reference books available:

Complete Herbal Handbook for farm and Stable; Juliette de Bairacli Levy
The Herdsman's Introduction to Homoeopathy; P Hansford and T Pinkus. Ainsworths 1998 Ed
Homoeopathy - A Shepherd's Guide; Elliott and Pinkus
Homoeopathic Treatment of Beef and Dairy Cattle; C Day
Homeopathy in the Veterinary Practice; K J Biddis
Pigs: The Homoeopathic Approach to the Treatment and Prevention of Diseases; George Macleod; C W Daniel 1994
The Treatment of Cattle by Homoeopathy; George Macleod, MRCVS, DVSM
ISBN 0 85207 247 3; The C W Daniel Company Ltd
Veterinary Materia Medica; G Macleod

OF&G INSPECTION AND CERTIFICATION CONTROL MANUAL

Record Sheet 17 - Animal Health Plan

It is recommended that this Health Plan be drawn up in consultation with a Vet. Use a separate sheet for each health problem.
All treatments/procedures must comply with OF&G Standards.

Producer: J Bloggs	Livestock: Dairy Cattle	Vet/Advisor: A.N.Other	Start Date: 19/10/2005
Health Problem	Biting flies in and around the Milking Parlour		

Management practices to control, resolve or reduce the health problem	Veterinary medicines to be used (if necessary)	Statutory Withdrawal periods required	Organic Withdrawal periods required
Identify the type of fly and try to find out where they're coming from. Check with neighbours to find out if they are having a similar problem.	As a last resort, treat with a Deltamethrin product used according to the manufacturer's instructions. (Ref: OF&G Standards 8.5.26)	None for Milk	48Hrs for milking cows
Improve cleanliness in the area around the dairy, remove slurry and manure every day.			
Fit brushes in the yard so the cattle can clean themselves, removing manure and dirt.			
Hang approved fly traps in the yard and parlour Hang an EFK (electric fly killer) in the parlour			
Fit a mist curtain at the entrance to the parlour so the flies are wiped off as the cattle come in. (A horticultural misting unit, available from garden centres or horticultural supplies, may be useful). Water sprays should not be used because these wet the cows and may create udder hygiene problems.	Note: fly tags are not acceptable for organic milking cows because the insecticide is systemic and the withdrawal period cannot be observed		
Improve hygiene in the milking parlour – keep it scrupulously clean.			
Use fans to keep the air moving in the parlour.			
Consider the use of a natural fly deterrent, such as citronella or lemon grass, in the parlour between milkings. (Ensure all milk or teat contact surfaces are rinsed with clean water before milking starts).			
Keep the parlour dark and closed between milkings, so as not to attract flies.			
For further on-farm advice, contact OF&G for a list of advisors or contact your milk buyer			