

Making the most of technology to drive thriving farm businesses

Farming systems have evolved over the last few years with technology being the driving force behind some of that. With the imminent future uncertain it is paramount that strict rules and regulations are maintained to continue to keep the public onside through the transition of change. This includes correct animal welfare standards and a high record of traceability. At the moment all sheep keepers must inform of movements, births and deaths. So far these systems have been moderately successful in terms of traceability. However, some producers feel it is time for change by implementing new systems to refresh flexibility and traceability.

Currently data collected regarding sheep keeping is a closed book. However, with an innovative approach, data could be shared through large bodies such as the food standards agency, rural payments agency and natural England. Defra are looking into creating and improving systems for tracing livestock moves. Simon Hall from the livestock information team within Defra spoke at the sheep event saying that 'they wanted to drive value for everybody by delivering a more comprehensible traceability system. This would allow a competitive trade advantage. It would also secure customer confidence'.

The new proposed Livestock Information Service will be a continuation of existing measures. It would however be a multi species service incorporating cattle, pigs and poultry. The idea is to capitalise on animal whereabouts and make it simple and easy to use. The service would also take advantage of digital formats now used making some areas of the service paperless, encouraging flexibility. It would allow shared data to be spread across several bodies and enable a service to add value. Funding was granted to Defra in 2015 enabling research and creation of the proposed product with it being set to be operational in 2019. It will demonstrate that the UK is at the forefront of food production by providing some of the best traceability foundations across the world. This will benefit the sheep industry's cause when leaving the EU and will mean the industry will be better placed regarding disease outbreak.

Collecting figures and statistics is not a new form of technology. Practical measures to collect data is just as important. Technology can be as simple as you make it and vitally important when it comes to animal health and welfare. Basic software packages can aid, inform and make better use of data to monitor and manage the flock. Continuous developments of aids to detect and diagnose issues such as lameness and clostridial infections is vital in welfare management especially when integrating practice and theory.

Technology in today's world should help your farm business and not hinder. Rob Hodgkins a sheep breeder from Hertfordshire, speaking at the seminar was quoted saying that 'you can't change what you can't measure'. Breeders are actively encouraged to collect a wealth of data to help improve profitability. EID systems allow the breeder to dive into data allowing analysis. Once you have a collection of information, management decisions can be identified from there. Cost of production is vital and without an element of data a clear picture of understanding cannot be obtained. Knowing your costs allows you to model your business on change and have clarity on numbers.

Sheep breeders overall are ready to embrace the upcoming change. Whether that be with the new Livestock Information Service, trying new health and welfare aids or just making a minor change within their day to day management. Performance data, patterns and trends can allow intense diagnosis which can only enhance the quality of the product. Technology is not the barrier, but trust is. It can be a fragmented industry at times but healthy as it is a knowledgeable one. The

introduction of some of these new services will allow more sharing of data which can only empower and innovate the industry further. The message is, do not be afraid of technology but just embrace it and allow it to drive the business forward.