Countdown to new EU salmonella testing legislation

2014 will see some significant changes in EU legislation surrounding salmonella control in abattoirs, however BPEX advises that, as the primary providers, producers need to be equally conscious of the changes afoot, and understand what responsibilities will fall on them, and when.

BPEX and other industry representatives are in active discussion with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) about the implementation of legislation to modernise pig meat controls, including a new visual only carcase inspection and updated salmonella and trichinella controls.

“The long and the short of it is that testing for salmonella is being tightened,” says Emma Bailey Beech, BPEX’s Health Information and Food Safety Coordinator.

She explains that new EU legislation will require abattoirs to identify farms where pigs show regular salmonella contamination. “The FSA will closely monitor all abattoir testing results from June 2014 and abattoirs will have to agree an action plan with the FSA if target levels are exceeded.”

Improvements in the Food Chain Information (FCI) sheets will form the foundations of this change in legislation and Emma explains that these, ‘more inquisitive’ forms, will dictate the level of carcase inspection required – either a new, purely visual examination or, in some cases, the traditional inspection involving incision and palpation.

The criteria for positive vs negative samples is being tightened too. Historically, the accepted level of incidence was 5 positives for every 50 samples taken, over a 10-week working period. “In other words you were allowed 10% salmonella prevalence,” says Emma. “This has now been reduced to just 3 positives out of every 50 over the same period – the equivalent of 6%.

“This is quite significant for abattoirs, particularly now that responsibility for corrective action will fall on the official veterinarian (OV) at the plant,” she adds.

The proposal is that, in time, farms may then be checked to assess their biosecurity standards. Those farms that are identified as ‘high risk’ could be referred to Defra and would then be required to reduce their Salmonella levels. In a worst case scenario, corrective action could go as far as refusal to accept pigs from a producer who consistently brings in animals who test positive for salmonella.
“There are obviously other steps that the OV could take before this stage, however this option is likely for repeat offenders,” Emma notes.

While these changes in legislation may pass relatively unseen to producers initially, BPEX is keen to remind them, as the primary providers, that steps to reduce salmonella at the production source, will help reduce the level of contamination during processing at the abattoir.

Because the meat inspectors will no longer be incising and palpating carcases and offal under the new methods, they should be able to focus more on reporting what they’ve seen and found, and producers could expect to see an improvement in Collection and Communication of Inspection Results (CCIR).

Although this is currently a legal requirement, many farmers are unaware that they are entitled to access this information. When they do, the results can be patchy and not particularly informative, and this is largely due to the inspector’s time constraints. The new legislation will allow inspectors to dedicate more time to these reports and farmers should be able to gain a much deeper understanding of the health of their pigs.

To help producers reduce salmonella prevalence on farms, BPEX has been working with Defra and the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA) on the four-year, £1.7 million R8 project, designed to identify reliable, cost-effective control measures for salmonella on farm. BPEX is actively inviting producers to take part, which will involve analysing the current, on-farm levels of salmonella on each specific site. Various control measures can be chosen, such as cleaning and disinfection, rodent control, vaccine use or movement of outdoor sites and any reductions in salmonella will be measured, to help identify effective control methods.

BPEX is also funding and co-ordinating expert training of farm staff on correct and efficient rodent control measures. Rodents carry a plethora of diseases, and can spread them very easily. They pose a significant disease threat. Mice in particular act as a reservoir for Salmonella.

One of the greatest barriers in controlling rodent infestations on farm, is correct knowledge, says BPEX’s Interim Veterinary Programme Manager, Helen Clarke. “There has never been an opportunity or requirement for producers to be educated on the ins and outs of rodent control; subsequently, the control methods on farm are usually not as effective as they could be. Equally, contracted pest controllers are not familiar with the complexities of a pig unit and therefore producers are best placed to gain and use basic knowledge, so they can work more effectively with their contractor.”

As a result, BPEX are offering bespoke rodent control training for any farms willing to participate. These free, day long workshops are available to farm managers and their staff, and provide them
with specific guidelines to controlling rodents on their unit. These sessions are supported by bespoke record-keeping logs, as well as ongoing reference material.

The activities all run alongside BPEX’s ongoing campaign for improved biosecurity. “Though our work with the Pig Health Improvement Project (PHIP), we’ve tried to really reinforce the idea that biosecurity is paramount when maintaining and improving herd health,” says Helen. She adds that, thanks to this increased awareness, “producers are a lot more tuned-in to methods of either preventing disease from entering their sites, or, if they have infection, stopping it from spreading. Many biosecurity measures will have an impact on the level of salmonella too. The general consensus is that if you can control salmonella, you can control most other diseases too.”

There are specific biosecurity measures that are particularly effective when combating salmonella. These include the adoption of an ‘all-in, all –out’, system, the prevention of any mixing between infected and healthy pigs, the separation of age groups, the implementation of stress reduction measures, such as good ventilation, and the prevention of faecal build-up.

The FSA’s changes are designed to maintain pork safety in its broadest sense. Although salmonella is a primary focus, the presence of trichinella will now be assessed too.

“Historically, trichinella testing has not been enforced by the FSA because they didn’t feel it was a significant risk given the last outbreak was over 40 years ago and, even then, it wasn’t in pigs,” Emma notes. “Under the new legislation, trichinella testing will be required in all cull sows and boars, OR 10% of finishing pigs. There will also be a requirement to test outdoor pigs fully.” Emma speculates that, in all likeliness, there will be an additional cost associated with that, which producers and processors will need to meet. “Outdoor pigs are deemed a higher risk due to the higher likelihood that parasitic burden is recycled in the paddock.”

She points out that a lot of plants actually carry out this testing for meat which is being exported, and will continue to do so under the new legislation. “Trichinella testing is a requirement of certain countries including Germany and America, and any plants shipping meat abroad will be carrying out this sampling already.”

Emma alludes to the fact that the industry is reviewing the practicality and necessity to obtain regional or national trichinella freedom status. This, however would involve testing all pigs for three years, which is an onerous commitment. She feels that, while abattoirs are looking at this, it won’t feature on the horizon for a while yet.
To keep up to date in the change in EU legislation, and to find out how to get involved in any of the services BPEX is offering, go to www.bpex.org.uk