ANIMAL HEALTH, NUTRITION & TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION EUROPE

Farm data: Not sit on it, but share and open up for real impact and progress in livestock production and health

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Markus Hammer, Global Head of Swine, Boehringer Ingelheim
Johan van Arendonk, Chief Innovation & Technology Officer, Hendrix Genetics
Kerryann Kocher, Chief Executive Officer, Vytelle

Farmers make decisions every single day, with our without big data helping them. But we are moving into the direction where data is more openly available and shared, with huge potential to increase livestock production efficiencies. “It is not about who owns the data, but how we can collectively make the data work at its best.”

This was one of the conclusions drawn from the panel session: Precision Farming Technologies Driving Sustainable Livestock Production, part of the Animal Health, Nutrition and Technology Innovation Europe 2024, in London. Panel moderator Spencer Swayze from Paine Schwartz Partners had an insightful conversation with panellists Markus Hammer from Boehringer Ingelheim, Johan van Arendonk from Hendrix Genetics and Kerryann Kocher from Vytelle

Accuracy key in breeding decisions

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- Kerryann Kocher, Chief Executive Officer, Vytelle

The US counts around 845,000 beef cattle producers, each applying their own preference and way of doing genetic selection. While the outcomes and wishes may be different for each farmer, the accuracy of the data used for every decision taken is key.
Kocher, CEO at the global livestock precision company Vytelle explained: “Cattle producers know which decisions they want to make, the answers they are looking for, and the economic value of them. But above all, they are aware of the threat of not making the right decisions in breeding, and the losses it can create. At Vytelle we are using data around individual animal feed intake and weight gain among others to select the most efficient animals. Then we apply our high-performance reproductive (hormone free) IVF technology to multiply genetics from these elite-performing animals. Together with accurate and standardised data, this speeds up genetic progress and makes decision making more founded,” Kocher explained.

Data ownership: Sharing is caring

Dave Ross addressed that quality and accuracy of the data is key While ten years ago, the industry was mostly concerned about ownership of the farm data, the livestock sector moved forward in being more open to share the data with others. Kocher addressed: “We started collecting data in the early 90s and we were also mainly concerned about data ownership. Then we entered a phase in which we looked at the possibilities of using the data, combined with being very protective of the data, as we considered it all proprietary information. Today, we are wide open and we encourage to take and share the data, because we know that we have to get the data to work. We cannot make full use of the data if we sit on it. Nothing happens in isolation. This mindset really started to unlock the journey that we (and our customers) are on.”

Hammer, leading the global swine business at Boehringer Ingelheim (BI) explained that since a few years, BI is becoming more data driven and is investing more in the development of digital tools and data solutions. “This is a great development and will help us to better predict progress and improve health and outcomes. Only 50-60% of the genetic potential in sows is currently being utilised. This means that at least 40% is lost due to health, genetics, environment, etc. We have to get a better grip on the many variables that influence each other. The challenge is to bring the different data points from all these input factors together (remove them from the data silos) and make them usable across the different industries (health, breeding, nutrition companies). A few percentage points improvement in efficiency will have huge implications considering he huge amount of pig numbers that large integrators produce every year.”

Data aggregation comes with responsibility

The more data we have, the better, and if we can better integrate different farm data sources, we can make data work, as Kocher explained earlier. And this requires data aggregation. “Precision livestock doesn’t come to live without the aggregator. But who are the main aggregators? The animal health and feed companies? I frankly don’t have the answer to that”, she said. Hammer added that while farm data belongs to the customer (farmer), the

aggregation and cleaning of the data lies with others. “And this takes commitment, money and effort. When choosing to be a data aggregator, we also have to make sure that data is stored in an organised manner and data protection is in place. It is also in the customer’s interest that certain dashboards with possible solutions they can take is not too biased. Farmers like the freedom to choose different products (vaccines for example) and work with different companies.”

Johan van Arendonk, Chief Innovation & Technology Officer at Hendrix Genetics added that farmers are willing to share data if it is not a one way traffic procedure. “This will not work. If we can show how we - as a genetic company - use the production data for better outcomes of breeding decisions, the farmers get valuable insights in return from the data he/she shared. This ecosystem of data sharing will further develop int he future and I am looking forward to how this will further help us decide and produce the desired animals for the future. Yet, we have to realise that genetics is long term. Results of the genetic selection choices we make today will become visible in 5 years from now. For certain management choices, results can become visible sooner.”

Combining expertise in biology and technology

Kocher concluded by sharing that it is exciting to see that more technologists from non-agricultural sectors are coming to the farming space. “Let us help them understand the nuances in our animal industry. When different expertise come together (biology meets technology) we can do great things and make further jumps in being more digital, accurate, effective and efficient in livestock production.”

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