Building sustainability into practice

What does it mean to be a sustainable large animal practice?

Whatever the large animal veterinary surgeon does today can be interpreted as being related to sustainability; but, looking through the titles for ongoing work and research, the term “sustainability” appears infrequently. Sophie Tapp is an environmental analyst with Promar International and is looking to apply her understanding from university and research to help develop practical solutions. She uses a working definition of sustainability: “ensuring that the practices of today’s generation do not compromise the ability of the next generation to meet their needs.”

Such a definition lays down a significant amount of responsibility. If a generation is some 25 years, then what could, or should, a veterinary practice have done in the late 1990s that would have benefitted colleagues and clients today? Is it reasonable to go back to the time when Tony Blair was prime minister and consider decisions taken at that time for long-term influence? Bovine spongiform encephalitis was still limiting the sale of beef; the Salmonella in eggs alarm had run its course; antibiotic-resistant coliforms had killed elderly wedding guests; and practices were not expecting to handle foot and mouth disease. Without a crystal ball, how is it possible to ensure that the way we manage matters today has beneficial, rather than harmful, outcomes?

What factors should we be considering?
Sophie points out that sustainability can be usefully broken down into three sections: environmental, social and economic. The environmental focus is probably easiest to appreciate with regard to the next generation. For businesses, the cost or additional effort required to become more environmentally responsible needs to be balanced by the benefits.

Promar International is part of the animal genetics company Genus and works within the supply chain (usually with packers and processors of food), where balancing the needs of farmers and retailers allows each part of a chain to thrive. Those in the middle of the supply chain are able to influence and drive sustainable practices, but are also affected by risks associated with sustainability.

Veterinary practices today would also appear to act in the middle of the responsibility chain, having direct influences on animal management and the attitudes of buyers, processors and retailers. Promar is guided by a “4R” business approach to sustainability:
- Mitigate risk
- Build resilience
- Source responsibly
- Unlock revenue

There is a tool to enable a business to address any issues and feel more confident about their sustainability position. The Promar Sustainability Assessment aims to identify, rate and assess risk to companies in order to understand the impact that these risks could have. Performance criteria are used to measure and track so that improvement can be assessed and actions identified to reduce risk and improve sustainability. The application of key performance indicators is well understood by veterinary surgeons assisting their clients to meet the demands of modern animal production.

There are many examples where a farmer has a clinical and subclinical problem that is preventing the animals from thriving, such as when the risk of further disease is identified, and a programme of control put in place. A straightforward example would be vaccination of calves. Time goes by and the programme reduces the disease to negligible or manageable levels and then a similar problem arises and it is found that the disease programme has not been implemented in full. A risk that was of great concern some time ago has been overtaken by other management issues.

Was the programme not sustainable because of effort or cost, or was the risk not fully appreciated long term?

Overcoming this programme slippage is a regular veterinary activity and it is possible to foresee interesting conversations between sustainability specialists and veterinary surgeons in this area.

Learning from others
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