
Using health plans on organic farms I: lowland cattle and sheep

Case study: Ruth and Malcolm Watkins, Ty Du Farm, Llanarth, Raglan
Organic lowland cattle and sheep

Ruth and Malcolm Watkins farm Ty Du, a 90 ha lowland sheep and beef holding near Llanarth, Raglan. The Watkins have been certified organic since 2001. They have 28 pedigree Welsh Black suckler cows and a bull and 160 Texel x Suffolk ewes, 35 replacements, and 5 rams. The sheep flock has been closed for approximately 10 years, and the beef herd is closed now.

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### **Health Planning**

The Watkins began health planning in 1999 when they started conversion to organic production – health planning being a compulsory part of certification. They were fortunate at this time to have a local vet practice that was very keen on the concept of health planning. The vet and the Watkins sat down together early in the conversion process to look at the whole farm system and identify where health and welfare improvements might be made on the farm. A template was then developed so that health problems in each of the livestock groups could be addressed in more detail. After identifying a health problem a management strategy was devised to deal with the problem, prevent recurrence and where necessary any treatment required.

### **Trace elements**

Monitoring animal performance was a key part of the health plan introduced during the conversion period and it was during this time that the Watkins noticed lambs were not thriving as well as they should post weaning. In addition, shortly after becoming fully organic in 2001, the Watkins began selling their lambs via a different route and received information back from the buyer on dead weight and carcass grades. By looking at the data they received, the fact that their lambs were not doing well after weaning and that there were increasingly high numbers of still born calves (approximately 17% stillborn in 2001) they realised that a significant problem had developed on the farm and asked their vet to investigate.

Their vet suspected that trace element deficiencies might be a problem and this may have arisen when mineral fertiliser application ceased during the conversion period. On his advice the Watkins tested their livestock, forage and soil for trace element status and Zinc, Copper, Cobalt, Selenium and Iodine were all found to be deficient. A plan to manage the problem was then devised with the vet. Being an organic farm it was not acceptable in the

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long term to simply supplement the animals with trace elements; rather a broader approach to prevent the problem occurring in the future was required. Due to the health and welfare

implications associated with trace element deficiencies, the Watkins were given permission from their organic certification body to supplement their livestock with trace elements, which they did immediately. Shortly thereafter the whole farm had trace elements applied based on the soil test results and an annual fodder testing and 4 yearly soil testing strategy were implemented to monitor trace element levels. A longer term strategy of renovating pastures and aerating soils to increase trace element availability was also developed, though this is restricted to cultivatable areas with the rest of the farm remaining in permanent pasture.

Following the trace element supplementation, growth rates, finishing dates and number of still born animals were monitored and a significant improvement was seen in all by the following season. There were no still born calves compared with 5 in the previous year (assuming they were sold at 9 months at a live weight of 270 kg, at £1.25/kg live weight (Organic Farm Management Handbook, 2001)) that was a financial loss of £1,330 to the Watkins) and all 170 February born lambs had been finished and sold by September – this is a pattern that has continued since the trace element plan was put in place. Prior to identifying and managing the trace element deficiency 100 lambs were being taken through until after Christmas and were still sold as stores, many of them as late as March or April. This had severe knock on effects in terms of feed availability and feed costs into the next season. The grades of the finished lambs are now consistently above the national average meaning better returns for the Watkins. The cattle are all now finished off grass on which they reach good weights and satisfactory grades.

By identifying and addressing the trace element problem through the use of health planning the Watkins have not only improved their animals health but also the financial performance of the farm through improved growth rates and grades, selling finished animals rather than stores, by reducing feed costs of over wintered animals and by reducing the number of calf deaths.

The Watkins now regularly analyse data on the health and performance of their livestock. They feel that the strategic health planning approach they took with the trace element problem and the great results they achieved has given them the confidence to continue to improve their system, not by making major changes, but rather continually tweaking all aspects of the system to gradually improve the health and quality of the animals they farm. Their health plan has been, and continues to be, an important tool in this process.