

Food Chain Information for Pigs in Europe – Sufficient in its Current Form?

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Background

Food chain information (FCI) according to Regulation (EC) No 853/2004 provides a bidirectional flow of information from farm to abattoir. It is collected along the food chain for slaughter animals and exchanged between the actors at the different stages of production. As part of the risk-based meat inspection, FCI could determine the intensity and procedure of ante- and post-mortem inspections depending on the risk of the incoming herds or individual animals. The exchange of FCI does not only allow for risk categorization and analysis of farms but also provide feedback of findings to the farms as part of a continuous improvement process. In Annex II, Section III of Regulation (EC) No 853/2004 the relevant data to be covered within FCI are defined including information on “the animals' health status”, the “veterinary medicinal products [...] administered to the animals within a relevant period and with a withdrawal period greater than zero [days]”, and “relevant reports about previous ante- and post-mortem inspections of animals from the same holding”. However, EU regulation does not specify which data should be collected. As a result, the information content in Europe differs from country to country. For instance, data on the mortality rate could or could not be included in the FCI and the relevant period for administered veterinary medicinal products prior to slaughter varies from 0 days to the entire fattening period. Within the framework of RIBMINS (Risk-based meat inspection and integrated meat safety assurance) as part of the COST Action (CA18105), an online survey was conducted to evaluate the current situation of FCI for pigs in Europe.

Materials and Methods

From November to December 2020 an online questionnaire was disseminated among the participating RIBMINS-countries to determine the status quo and potential improvements on FCI for pigs. Suitable food business operators, quality assurance managers, meat inspection officers, official veterinarians, and/or persons that were dealing with FCI for pigs on a daily basis were asked to fill out the questionnaire. After the first evaluations of the results, which generated one dataset, the questionnaire was re-opened from September to November 2022. The second data collection was conducted to gain a more representative picture since some important pig producing countries in Europe were missing previously. The analysis of the results from the first survey also revealed some inconsistencies in responses from participants working in the same country. Due the deviating answers on the relevant period of time for administered veterinary medicinal products from the first survey, a query within the RIBMINS-network was performed from February to September 2022. This time, experts from the RIBMINS-countries were asked to provide the correct time frame on the relevant period and, if applicable, the national regulation as well as the official forms

for FCI in order to perform an accurate analysis of the results from the other two questionnaire surveys.

Results

51 participants from 17 countries responded to the first survey. The second round of data collection was completed by 40 participants from 12 countries. In total, 91 participants from 23 countries answered to the questionnaire. In terms of the query, for 20 countries the relevant period and the official forms for FCI could be identified completely. For seven countries it was partly possible. All in all, the results regarding the information content of the FCI differed vastly throughout Europe. The results from the questionnaire showed inter alia that 56.0% of the respondents had access to data regarding treatments with a withdrawal period greater 0 days. Likewise, overall, 63.7% of respondents had access to ante-mortem data and 61.5% to post-mortem data. Since all these data are mandatory by EU regulation, a deeper look into the answers that did not have access shall be part of the presentation at the conference. In general, 59.3% of all respondents assessed FCI as helpful for decision-making regarding food safety. The transmission procedure of FCI was assessed helpful by 67.0% of the participants. The electronic access to FCI seems to be a great variable to the evaluation of helpfulness of FCI and its transmission procedure. The majority of respondents (84.6%) answered to receive FCI forms paper based. This was also noted when collecting the official forms for FCI. Besides, the results of the query also presented a great variation of forms. They were either species-specific or included all species in one form. Also, they not only differed from country to country but were abattoir-specific in some cases.

Conclusion

The study revealed that more than 40% of the participants were dissatisfied with the FCI currently available. It also showed for various mandatory data that up to 44% of participants did not receive these. Furthermore, in some instances, participants claimed to have received mandatory data. On closer examination, however, it became apparent that this was not the case. This revealed a lack of knowledge with regard to FCI among the participants. Accordingly, some data transported through FCI appear hollow and not resulting in a consequence. The current use of FCI is insufficient and needs improvement and standardization including the specification of data and instruction of the persons working with it.

References

European Commission. (2004). Regulation (EC) No 853/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2004 laying down specific hygiene rules for food of animal origin. *OJ, L 139*, 55. <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2004/853/2022-12-08>