

Antibiotic free labels in the French pig industry:

To reduce antibiotic use, to raise awareness and to remunerate

Context and Background

Antibiotic resistance has been a major public health problem and a growing societal concern since the early 2000s. This has led to decisions and regulations at the European Union level (recently the new Veterinary Medicines Regulation 2019/6 and the Farm to Fork Strategy), and to the French national action plan Ecoantibio which set targets for reducing antibiotics (AB) use in veterinary medicine (-25% between 2012-2016).

Solution

Since the early 2010s, stakeholders of the French pig industry have developed AB free private standards to meet market demand, provide financial support and communicate on the efforts made by farmers. Within the ROADMAP project, we conducted an analysis of the AB free supply chains in the French pig sector (representing about 15% of French pig production). The analysis was based on the inventory and synthesis of the existing literature and 7 semi-directive interviews were carried out with 5 producers' organizations, 1 meat processor and 1 retailer. A part of the interview was devoted to the description of the AB free scheme of the company. In addition, interviews were conducted with 18 breeders to understand their motivation towards AB use and AB free labels.

Outcome

The AB free claim in France has been always included in a more global valorization approach including GMO free, welfare, social and environmental criteria. According to the survey results:

- In the absence of a collective scheme, private specifications have multiplied in pig sector, as a way to differentiate from competitors and to avoid "name and shame". Today, each retailer or meat processor has its own AB free line (see photos). The demand identified by the processors and retailers is mainly for cooked ham, which complicates the valorization of the whole carcass.
- The specifications are scalable. For the ban of antibiotics, the claim is moving from "from 42 days (two or three weeks after the weaning)" to "from birth".
- Once there is compromise between the cooperatives and their clients on requirements, additional costs and bonus, the cooperatives offer some of their members that use less antibiotics to join the line. The lines with the highest volumes are "[Bien élevés](#)" from the Cooperl (350 farms, 3 million pigs produced without antibiotics, including 1 million since birth), "[La Nouvelle Agriculture](#)" from the Terrena cooperative (60 farms, 200,000 pigs) and "[Engagé dans l'élevage](#)" from the Avril cooperative with the Fleury-Michon processor (40-50 farms, 100,000 pigs).
- The farmer perceives a bonus of a variable amount depending on the constraints (about 5 €/pig). The treated pigs (tattooed and ear-tagged to be separated at slaughter) may or not benefit from the added value depending on the line. The bonus rewards farmers for their changes in practices and investments regarding biosecurity, vaccination, alternative products, monitoring, identification, etc.

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Images



Each retailer or meat processor has its "Antibiotic-free" specifications



- The farmers are controlled each year by the cooperative and 10% of them are audited by an independent control body. The monitoring of the use of antibiotics by the Animal Level Exposure to Antibiotics (ALEA) is not compulsory in all labels and the calculation methods are heterogeneous which does not allow comparisons. Other recorded health criteria are treated animals and mortality rates.
- AB free labels are a technically and economically feasible solution to reduce the use of antibiotics. They encourage and promote better farming practices, satisfy consumer demand and secure outlet and supply. However, the result of the survey shows that AB free market is considered mature today in French pig sector. Producing without AB in the long term requires constant rigor, diligence and technicity by the farmers. Pig health has always a very fragile balance and antibiotics remain irreplaceable to treat some infections.

Practical recommendations

There is a need to simplify the multiple claims for a better understanding by the consumer and to provide more freedom to pig producers. This could be achieved by:

- promoting a legal definition of the "AB free" claim like "GMO free" and,
- simplifying the pork market segmentation into four classes - standard (VPF-QT, including entry level of some claims), Product Conformity Certificate (premium level of harmonized claims about welfare, AB, GMO...), Label Rouge and organic.

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