Teagasc Advisory Newsletter

Pigs

December 2024

Edited by Ciarán Carroll

Welcome to the December edition of the Teagasc Pig Newsletter. As we head into the busy Christmas period it's good to see that pig prices have continued to hold their own in December, in fact it was unusual to see processors looking for extra pigs, with some even offering higher prices. Hopefully this will continue into Christmas and the new year.

In this month's edition, we cover a number of interesting and useful articles. Michael McKeon gives us a summary of his review and outlook presentation from the Teagasc Outlook conference held in early December.

Laura Boyle highlights the progress we have made with regards to reducing antimicrobial use in Ireland, but also highlights that it is still a big issue internationally and there's more we can do. It's how to get the whole food chain to buy-in and support this.

AS we approach the festive season, we hope that consumers will support our industry at this time of year and reach for Irish produce whether it be in the store or in the butchers. As part of a promotion on the use of Irish food ingredients for your Christmas dinner, Teagasc have produced a series titled "The Story of your Christmas Dinner", with four articles focusing on the turkey, ham, brussels sprouts and potatoes. The "ham" article is included in this newsletter. You might like to share it with your family and friends (farming and non-farming)?

Finally all of us in the PDD would like to wish you, your family and staff a happy and peaceful Christmas and here's to a happy, heathy prosperous new year.

In this issue:

Teagasc
Agriculture and Food Development Authority

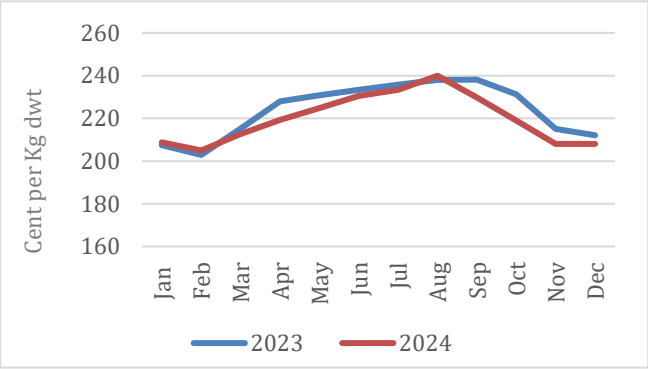
Annual Review and Outlook 2025 – the key highlights

Michael McKeon

2024 Review

- **Pig Feed Costs**: The annual average feed cost was 134 c/kg dwt, 14% lower than 2023 but still 12% above pre-Ukraine war levels.
- **Pig Prices**: Averaged 220 c/kg dwt, slightly below 2023 (224 c/kg) but higher than the five-year average (192 c/kg).
- **Production**: Pig slaughter increased by 2.8% to 3.58 million head, with a slight rise in the national sow herd to 138,000.
- **Exports**: Irish pigmeat exports grew by 2.3%, with modest gains to China (+1.4%), although volumes were significantly lower compared to 2021.

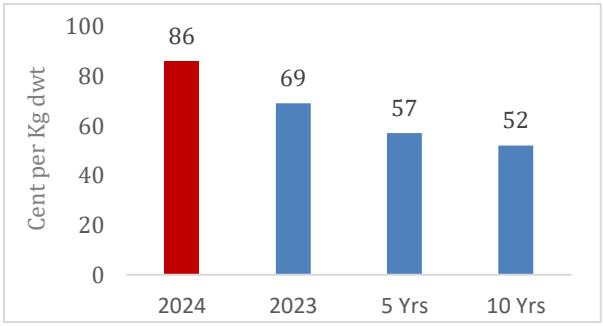
Monthly Irish Pig Prices 2023 – 2024



2025 Outlook

- **Feed Prices**: Expected to decrease moderately (-2%) to 130 c/kg dwt due to better global harvests and contract milling trends.
- **Pig Prices**: Forecast at 202 c/kg dwt, influenced by reduced EU exports, continued tight supply, and weak Chinese import demand**.**
- **Profitability**: Expected margin-over-feed (MOF) is 72 c/kg, indicating moderate profitability, lower than the 2024 MOF of 86 c/kg.

Margin Over Feed: Historical Comparison



Key Trends

1. **Global Feed Market**:
   - Stable to declining feed costs driven by improved northern hemisphere harvests.
   - Risks remain tied to Russian crop rating and any Black Sea region export disruptions.
2. **EU Pig Supply**:
   - Continued tight supply due to decreased sow herds in major producing countries.
   - Spain remains an exception with marginal herd growth (+1%).

3. **China's Influence**:
    - Weak demand and potential trade tariffs on EU pigmeat could pressure prices further.
    - EU exports to China dropped 12% in 2024, and further reductions may impact the market.

Challenges and Risks

- African Swine Fever (ASF) outbreaks in Europe.
- Regulatory pressures increasing costs for EU producers.
- Uncertainty around Chinese trade policies.

Sector Profitability

- Despite early 2025 price drops, moderate profitability is anticipated due to lower feed costs in the second half of the year.
- Continued focus on efficiency and market adaptation is essential for sustaining gains.

Antimicrobial Use – still a major concern worldwide

Laura Boyle

Antibiotic or antimicrobial resistance (AMR) remains a greater and more pressing threat to human and animal health than climate change and yet it receives much less attention in the media. A recent study published in The Lancet estimated that 4.95 million people died of an antibiotic-resistant infection in 2019, and for 1.27 million of these people their deaths were attributable to the antibiotic resistance of the infection. It also places farm animals at risk from ineffective treatment of disease. I started and ended the year speaking to two very different audiences about the importance of animal welfare in addressing the threat of AMR.

In early February I attended a parliamentary event in The House of Lords in London on 'How to end the misuse of antibiotics in farming'. It was organised by The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics which is an alliance of health, medical, civil society and animal welfare groups The participants

included vets, campaigners, representatives from AHDB and Red Tractor as well as several British MPs.

The Policy and Science Manager at the "Alliance" talked about antibiotic use in farming in the UK, the impact of global farm antibiotic use on the problem of antibiotic resistance, proposed UK legislative changes and the Alliance position on animal husbandry. Human health expert Dr. Ron Daniels who is NHS Intensive Care Consultant and Founder of the UK Sepsis Trust, reminded people of the significance of antibiotic resistance and the impact it has on human health. I presented evidence from work at Moorepark and abroad demonstrating how improvements to pig management and housing leads to better welfare, driven by reduced stress and a more resilient immune system making animals healthier and therefore less in need of antibiotics.

In late October I presented a similar story to about 500 delegates at the World Conference on Animal Welfare in the Sustainable Agri-food Systems in Beijing, China. The overall aim of the conference organised mainly by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the China Association for the Promotion of International Agricultural Cooperation was to develop a new blueprint for the green development of Chinese agriculture – including animal welfare.

Of course the situation in China differs dramatically from the UK or the EU. EU legislation that came into force on the 28th of January 2022 bans routine farm antibiotic use and restricts prophylactic use to exceptional cases and for individual animals only. It also prohibits using antibiotics to compensate for inadequate husbandry and poor hygiene. The legislation limits metaphylaxis (group treatment of animals) to cases when the risk of disease spread is high. In China, the use of antibiotics to promote growth was only banned recently and there is widespread prophylactic use of antibiotics.

The EU has clearly come a long way from this, with the European Surveillance of Veterinary Antimicrobial Consmption (ESVAC) reporting that sales of antibiotics for use in food-producing animals in Europe fell by more than 43% from 2011 to 2020. Ireland has been making progress too with HPRA reporting that Sales (tonnes sold) of Veterinary Antibiotics having decreased by 25% from 2018 to 2023. This is good news, but more can be done, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to raise welfare standards (and improve health) when the industry is so highly cost:price driven and pig producers are in a never ending race to stand still. Production models in which farmers receive a premium for animal products produced under higher welfare programs can help but these are limited in scope.

There are some success stories. As in most EU countries, there was a lot of criticism of animal welfare in conventional Dutch broiler production (i.e., production systems that only satisfy the legal minimum requirements) for decades. In 2014–2015, the entire Dutch fresh broiler meat sector

(representing about 30% of total domestic production) moved to a higher welfare system which included a slower growing animal, more space, and an improved light regime. This transition and with it slightly higher prices (for farmers and consumers), occurred without negative consumer responses, i.e. there was no decline in fresh meat consumption. The buy-in of processors, retailers and consumers to pay more was critical to this success story. Important factors in the transition were:

1. The availability of a cost-efficient alternative to conventional concepts,
2. A basic willingness to change within the entire value chain (including processors and consumers),
3. Initiating and triggering actions by non-governmental organizations,
4. Decisive initiatives by retailers and,
5. Simultaneous introduction of the new concept and replacement of the conventional concept.

An important side effect of this partial transition was that the use of antimicrobials was reduced between 2015 and 2016. If these decisive factors are present in an industry, it appears that considerable improvements with regards to animal welfare (and therefore animal health) can be obtained in a relatively short period of time. The question is, what can we do in Ireland to achieve this?

From Farm to Fork- the Story of Your Christmas Ham

Ciarán Carroll

As part of a promotion on the use of Irish food ingredients for your Christmas dinner, Teagasc are producing a series titled "The Story of your Christmas Dinner", with four articles focusing on the turkey, ham, brussels sprouts and potatoes. The following is the "ham" article. You might like to share it with your family and friends (farming and non-farming)?

The Christmas ham is an institution in our home, and many homes throughout Ireland, served along with the turkey as the centerpiece of the festive celebrations. Behind each ham is a careful process of pig production, preparation, and curing that transfers the meat into the ham we all know and love.

Pig Production – the first step

Pig production begins on the many farms around specialising in rearing pigs. The 260 pig farms in Ireland vary in size, with the average herd holding 530 sows. The process starts with selecting healthy pig breeds, the main ones here being

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Large White, Landrace and Duroc (the breed that gives that juicy flavour to the meat).

The pigs are reared in a temperature-controlled environment to ensure optimal health and welfare. They are fed a nutritional balanced diet, typically consisting of barley, wheat, maize, soyabeans/beans, minerals and vitamins. The aim is to produce high-quality pig meat (pork) with good fat marbling (for flavour) and texture.

Pigs are generally reared from "birth to bacon" (ham) in about six months, reaching a sale weight of 110-120kg. Once they reach this weight, they are processed humanely in facilities that follow strict regulatory guidelines to ensure food safety and quality.

Pork to Ham – the curing process

Once the pig is processed, the leg of the pig (the main cut used for ham production) is carefully prepared for curing. The Christmas ham involves two key processes, curing and cooking, to preserve and flavour the meat.

Curing: this is the process that gives the ham it's distinctive taste and extends it's shelf life. Traditionally, this was done by using salt to draw out the moisture from the meat, to prevent spoilage. Nowadays, the curing process involves the use of brine (a mixture of water, salt, sugar and sometimes nitrates). The leg is submerged in the brine or it can be injected with it to distribute the flavour. The process can take several days to weeks, depending on the method used.

Smoking: some of you like your hams smoked, which adds a rich savoury flavour. The smoking process involves exposing the cured ham to low-temperature smoke from burning hardwood, such as hickory or oak, giving the ham a smoky aroma and enhancing the flavour.

Cooking & Glazing: before the ham reaches the shop shelf, they are often fully cooked, so they are ready to eat for the Christmas feast. Quite often a glaze is applied, often made up of honey, brown sugar, mustard and spices, which carmelizes when baked, giving the ham it's beautiful golden brown finish.

From farm to Fork

The final product is a succulent ham, full of flavour, ready to be served at the Christmas table. While it's best enjoyed hot along with your Christmas turkey and all the trimmings, the leftover ham (if there is any) can be sliced and served cold in a salad, sandwich or wrap.

In summary, the Christmas ham reflects the combined efforts of farmers, butchers and food producers who use modern farming techniques and traditional curing processes to ensure that you and your family can enjoy it, savouring both the taste and craft behind it during the Christmas celebrations.

Remember to look for the Bord Bia Origin-Ireland logo when you're shopping for your Christmas ham, this logo is proof that your ham was born, reared and processed in Ireland and is a great way to support Irish pig farmers this Christmas.

Teagasc Pig Development Department have produced a video demonstration on "Cooking Your Christmas Ham" and for those of you who like sausage meat at Christmas time there's another video, "Festive Irish Sausage Rolls"

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Reminder: Survey of the status of PRRS on pig farms

Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS) – Blue Ear - is a viral disease infecting sows and pigs leading to reproductive failure (abortions, weak and stillborn piglets, infertility), and causes pneumonia and increased mortality in young animals. It is one of the most economically important diseases for the global pig industry. To explore the possibility of developing a control programme for PRRS at national level in conjunction with Northern Ireland, the first step is to pinpoint all pig farms on a map including their current status for PRRS.

We are asking for your collaboration in completing this very short survey. When presenting the map to stakeholders the exact locations of the farms will be anonymised so no individual farm can be identifiable.

Congrats to Dr. Shiv Vasa!

On 5th December last, Shiv Vasa successfully defended his PhD thesis titled 'Improving the health, feed intake and growth of pigs by pre- and post-weaning liquid feed supplementation of piglets and optimising sow nutrition during lactation'. The viva defence was conducted in SETU Waterford with the examiners being Prof. Paolo Trevesi (University of Bologna, Italy) and Dr. Denise O'Meara (SETU Waterford). The supervisors on Shiv's PhD were Prof. Peadar Lawlor and Dr. Kealin O'Driscoll (Teagasc), Prof Gillian Gardiner (SETU, Waterford) and Dr. Giuseppe Bee (Agroscope, Switzerland). We would like to congratulate Dr. Vasa on this huge achievement and wish him every success in his future career.

For more information:

Please visit our webpage at:
https://www.teagasc.ie/animals/pigs/

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Agriculture and Food Development Authority