Teagasc Advisory Newsletter

Pigs

July 2025

Edited by Ciarán Carroll

Welcome to the July edition of the Teagasc Pig Newsletter. Pig prices took a huge hit this past month, with an unprecedented 20 cent/kg drop over a fortnight. While it could be argued that the first 10 cent/kg drop was a realigning of Irish pig price with the European one, the second 10 cent/kg drop a week later is really difficult to explain! This is a massive blow to a sector that is still recovering from being on it's knees less than two years ago. Hopefully there will be some upward realignment in the very near future!

We have another full newsletter this month. In a new update from our feedstuff analysis programme in Moorepark, Kieran Keane looks in more detail at the lower protein levels in cereals and the impact this may be having on our diets.

The Farm Apprenticeship Programme is open for applicants for the 2025 intake. Numbers to date from the pig sector have been low since the new apprenticeships started in December 2023. We need a minimum number of at least 10 students to justify investing time and resources into this programme, so have a read of the article and contact your Specialised Pig Advisor if you have someone suitable for the course.

Finally, Neil Tirchett gives and update on the Welfarmers project, with some good news that two Irish submissions have been shortlisted for an overall winners award.

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teagasc

Agriculture and Food Development Authority

If Crude Protein is down- what's up?

Kieran Keane, Moorepark

As part of Teagasc's feed and feedstuffs analysis programme for the pig sector we have been analysing cereals for well over a year now. As we approach the 2025 harvest now is a good time to reflect on results to date. We have seen a lot of variation particularly in crude protein levels of cereals. The table below shows the difference in crude protein in barley and wheat over the last 2 harvests.

	Average CP		Highest 10% CP		Lowest 10% CP	
Harvest	**Barley**	**Wheat**	**Barley**	**Wheat**	**Barley**	**Wheat**
2023	9.87%	10.50%	11.22%	11.60%	9.21%	9.33%
2024	9.48%	9.89%	11.07%	10.96%	8.28%	8.82%

Table 1: Crude protein results from wet chemistry analysis

The orange columns show the average crude protein values across all samples of that analysed ingredient from both the 2023 and 2024 harvest. The green percentages are the averages of the highest 10% of results from each harvest and the red is the averages across the lowest 10% of results. As you can see there is considerable variation in crude protein and there has been a consistent decrease between the two harvests. This does beg the question: if the percentage of crude protein in wheat and barley is lower then what is taking its place.

Whilst the sum of the other nutrients does increase if crude protein, so far fat, fibre, ash and sugar don't seem to follow a predictable pattern in relation to crude protein. However, dry matter and starch content do seem to have a closer relative link to crude protein levels. The tables below show the average dry matter and starch

content of barley and wheat at 3 different levels of crude protein.

BARLEY			WHEAT		
Crude Protein	Average Dry Matter	Average Starch	Crude Protein	Average DM	Average Starch
8 to 9% CP	87.11%	55.91%	10%% CP	87.38%	61.95%
9 to 10% CP	87.62%	54.65%	10 to 11% CP	87.49%	61.77%
>10% CP	88.18%	52.98%	>11% CP	87.79%	61.17%

Table 2: Average dry matter and starch of barley and wheat at different crude protein bands.

As the level of crude protein increases so too does the average dry matter. This makes sense as the less moisture in the grain the more space for nutrients. Also, the lower the protein in the cereal the higher the starch. This is more pronounced in the barley analysed to date. As wheat and barley are bought mainly for their starch content this isn't a bad outcome. So, the decrease in protein levels from the 2024 harvest were replaced in part by extra starch.

However, additional starch doesn't necessarily mean that the energy of an ingredient is higher. Protein is also a contributor to the energy of a cereal. This means that a barley with 8% crude protein could potentially have the same energy as a barley with 11% crude protein when incorporated into a diet. If we continue this example into a diet context where barley is 60% of the diet. It means that the dietary impact of using the 8%CP barley vs the 11%CP barley would be a decrease of 1.8% dietary crude protein with little or no energy decrease. As pigs will eat to energy we may be under or oversupplying protein to them.

We've seen firsthand in the lab how diet consistency can vary, even when using the same formulation. In one example, two finisher diets made to the same recipe just 10 days apart showed crude protein levels of 14.6% and 17.3%, respectively. The target crude protein was 16%, so while the average looks acceptable, the variation is significant. Lysine levels were measured at 1.04% and 1.16%, again the target

was the average of these two, 1.1% total lysine. Synthetic lysine accounted for 42% of the total dietary lysine. This helped buffer the impact of the crude protein inclusion on lysine availability.

Interestingly, both diets had identical energy content, meaning pigs consumed similar amounts of feed each week—but received significantly more crude protein in the second batch. While pigs may still perform adequately on the 14.6% diet, the 17.3% batch represents a potential overspend. In fact, this difference could amount to an estimated cost of €3.50 per tonne—highlighting the importance of consistent diet mixing and regular feed testing.

Ultimately, ongoing analysis and adaptation will be key to maintaining feed quality and supporting animal performance in an evolving crop landscape.

Farm Apprenticeship Programme – We Need the Numbers!

Ciarán Carroll, Moorepark

The Teagasc Farm Apprenticeship programme commenced in December 2023, offering the Farm Technician (Higher Certificate Level 6) programme and Farm Manager (Bachelor Degree Level 7) programme. Although the apprenticeship programmes are across different commercial farming enterprises, the Teagasc PDD are heavily involved in delivering the pig specific content. To date we have been involved in delivering the Level 6 Farm Technician programme in conjunction with Clonakilty Agricultural College. However, numbers are low from the pig industry and will need to increase if we are to be in a position to offer the apprenticeship programmes for the pig industry from September 2025.

To remind you what's involved, the Farm Technician programme is for those who wish to pursue a career in the agricultural industry as a farm technician or for existing personnel in the industry who would like to gain a qualification. It trains apprentices to operate successfully within Irish farming systems, gaining skills in daily operations, compliance with industry standards and regulatory measures. It will lead to a Level 6 Higher certificate. Full details on the Farm Technician Apprenticeship programme can be found here.

The farm manager programme creates a pathway to a managerial career in the agricultural sector,

equipping the apprentice with the latest research and best practice management knowledge to successfully run a commercial farm business. It will lead to a Level 7 degree and is available through Kildalton Agricultural College. Full details on the farm manager programme can be found here.

Each apprenticeship is two years in length and leads to a major award on the National Framework of Qualifications. Informative videos are available here.

As mentioned, we need sufficient registered apprentices from the pig industry if we are to run the programme from September 2025. If you have a member of staff that is interested in either programme you will need to register to be a SOLAS Approved Employer and the staff member will have to apply to be an apprentice. If you do not have a member of staff interested but are interested in employing an apprentice then you can apply to be a SOLAS Approved Employer and you will be able to advertise an apprentice position whereby you recruit a farm apprentice to work on your farm as part of their apprenticeship programme. This provides an education route for those already involved in the industry but also those who would like to be.

The next steps for those interested

1. Register the farm to become an apprentice employer. After this there will be a number of follow up steps to complete registration, including a phone call and a site visit. Only after this is complete and the farm has been approved by SOLAS can the potential employee apply to become an apprentice.
2. Read the relevant programme guides detailing the programme content and apprentice entry requirements.
3. Identify which programme you or your staff member is interested in; Level 6 Farm Technician or Level 7 Farm Manager

We all know how hard you and your team work every day and the right training can make that work even more efficient, safe, and rewarding. By signing your farm up as a SOLAS Approved Employer or by sending staff to the apprenticeship programme, you're not just building skills, you're building confidence, improving productivity, and ensuring the future

success of your farm. The Farm Apprenticeship programme doesn't just benefit your farm, it keeps the industry strong. Your participation helps keep expert training available and accessible to all.

To find out more or to discuss further please contact your Teagasc Specialised Advisor, Clonakilty Agricultural College (+3538832500) or Marcella Phelan (National Apprenticeship Programme Co-ordinator, Teagasc – Curriculum & Development Standards Unit) at marcella.phelan@teagasc.ie

For further information check out the Generation Apprenticeship portal, or the Apprenticeships section on the Teagasc website

The PRRS Control Programme in the Republic of Ireland

Emer McCrum & Edgar Garcia Manzanilla (Teagasc), Emma O'Connor & Carla Gomes (AHI)

The origins of the programme

According to Teagasc data, farms that are positive to PRRS have an extra cost of 4 to 7 cents per kg deadweight. This is not only because of the effects of the PRRS virus itself but because the virus opens the door to other secondary pathogens like Pasteurella or Streptococcus, increasing labour costs, medicine use, mortality and reducing growth.

Due to this cost, Pig Regen and DAERA identified PRRS as a priority for disease control and started a PRRS Regional Control Programme that has been ongoing in Northern Ireland for the last 5 years. The programme was an Operational Group (funded by European Innovation Partnership, EIP) and started as a pilot in a 5km radius area around Cookstown.

The pilot programme resulted in benefits in productive performance (increased in born alive and weights), reductions in factory lesions (reduced pericarditis and pleurisy) and, most important, it was a great social experience showing the benefit of collaboration between stakeholders. The programme is now being rolled out across Northern Ireland.

What are the main actions implemented as part of the programme

The programme is very simple and is designed to bother farmers and veterinarians as little as possible. The 4 main actions are:

- Test farms regularly to study type and evolution of the virus
- Create a pig health mapping tool with the location and PRRS status of the farms
- Synchronise PRRS vaccination in all the farms in the area
- Implement biosecurity actions to reduce PRRS virus circulation within and between farms

Extending the programme into the Republic of Ireland (RoI)

It makes sense to extend the programme to the whole island of Ireland and, for this reason, IFA approached Teagasc to develop a similar approach in the RoI. Teagasc and AHI have secured funding (EIP Operational Group, similar to NI) to pilot the programme in a group of farms in Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal. The first farms of interest are the ones in the border regions because those are the ones that are in proximity to NI farms and can infect them. The actions in these farms will be the same as in NI: test farms regularly, map the farms and their PRRS status, synchronise the vaccination on the same dates as in NI and implement biosecurity actions.

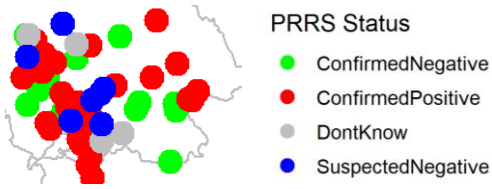
The team

The implementation of the programme is a very intensive exercise and some key figures in the success of the NI programme are Gary Anderson (Chair of Pig Regen), Violet Wylie (Pig Regen Innovation Broker), who ensures coordination among the stakeholders on a daily basis, and Mark Hawe (DAERA Advisor) who supports the implementation within the farmer network. These roles will be developed in the RoI by Emma O'Connor (AHI Innovation Broker) and Emer McCrum (Teagasc Advisor). If you are interested in knowing more about this programme please contact them directly eoconnor@animalhealthireland.ie and emer.mccrum@teagasc.ie.

Testing farms and mapping their PRRS status

Collaboration and openness are key for the success of such a programme (as is confidentiality within the group) and the first step is to identify the location of all the involved farms, their PRRS status and their vaccination practices. This knowledge helps to decide which are the areas with more risk and the main actions needed at an area level to reduce the circulation of virus. AHI developed a survey and 92 farms were identified in the borders region of which 66.3% were confirmed or suspected positive, 28.3% confirmed negative and 5.4% don't know their status. Of those, most of the farms confirmed positive are vaccinating, mostly in sows but very few in piglets too.

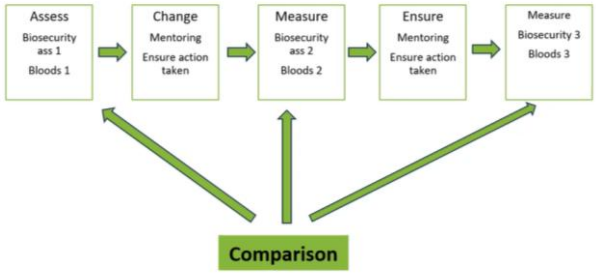
As an example of the need for mapping, you can see the figure below which represents a sample radius of around 20km in the Cavan area with some farms included. The size of the point has been increased and the actual status of some farms have been changed for confidentiality. The first step in this map would be to confirm the status of those farms that are suspected or whose status we do not know. Once we know the status of all the farms, we need to discuss how to control the risk of negative farms becoming positive and how we can minimise circulation of the virus in positive farms to avoid clinical disease to improve health and reduce costs.



Synchronising vaccination and implementing biosecurity actions

The farms participating in the programme do not need to change their vaccine. Those that are on a blanket vaccination programme will need to synchronise the timing of vaccination among them and with NI. Those on a 6 and 60 protocol can continue with the same protocol. Once the vaccination is synchronised, the veterinarians will assess the biosecurity practices in the farm using some sections of the Biocheck.UGent tool and they will identify the easiest and most impactful actions to improve biosecurity in the farm and reduce the load of virus. Biosecurity actions can be as simple as changing needles more often or using colour coded materials for different stages.

The programme will run for the next 2 years (see figure below), and the situation will be reassessed annually (more often if needed) for performance, circulation of virus and lung lesions in the factory. One of the advantages of this programme is that it will not only affect the clinical effects of PRRS but also the general health and welfare of the animals. Teagasc and AHI are in the process of obtaining extra funding to add analysis of flu in the same farms to have a more complete picture of the pathogens.



Welfarmers – Good Practices Evaluation Underway

Neil Tirchett, Moorepark

Since our last update in the April Newsletter issue, the WelFarmers project has seen significant developments in its mission to improve pig welfare across Europe through farmer-led knowledge sharing.

Evaluating Good Practices Across Europe

A total of 93 good practices from pig farms across eight European countries were submitted for evaluation. These practices are available to browse on the project's website:

www.welfarmers.com

The practices cover four key welfare themes:

- Loose housing for lactating sows
- Raising pigs with undocked tails
- Avoiding pain during castration
- Space allowance and flooring for fatteners

For each theme, a thematic expert group — composed of farmers, veterinarians, advisors, researchers, and food industry stakeholders — was tasked with scoring the practices based on three main criteria:

- Excellence / Technical quality
- Impact
- Exploitation / Probability of success

Each group selected the best 5 practices per theme. These 20 shortlisted practices have now been passed on to the Regional Networks — national groups of pig farmers representing each participating country — for further evaluation. We are also proud to share that two practices from Ireland have made it with these selections by the thematic expert groups. One within the theme of Loose Housing for Lactating Sows, and another under Space Allowance & Flooring.

Irish Farmers Weigh In

On 24th July 2025, the Irish Regional Network held its evaluation meeting. Farmers from the Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) and

representatives from Teagasc engaged in in-depth discussions on the shortlisted practices.
It was noted that while many practices offer clear welfare benefits, some are challenging to implement in the Irish context. For instance, several practices rely on the extensive use of straw — both as bedding and enrichment — which is not readily available in Ireland and can add costs or conflict with slurry system infrastructure.
Additionally, some practices originate from countries where farmers receive financial premiums at slaughter for implementing higher welfare standards, such as keeping animals with intact tails or providing increased space allowance. Without similar incentives in Ireland, adoption may be more difficult.

Project Webinar and Knowledge Sharing

On 9th July 2025, the second WelFarmers webinar was held, offering a deeper look into the collection and evaluation of good practices. Regional network coordinators, including Ciarán Carroll (Ireland), presented insights on:

- How practices were collected
- Challenges during the evaluation process
- Examples from selected practices

You can watch the webinar recording here.

WelFarmers Presented at EU Platform on Animal Welfare

On 30th June 2025, WelFarmers was presented at the 17th Meeting of the EU Platform on Animal Welfare, hosted by the European Commission's DG SANTE.
Edgar Garcia Manzanilla, Head of Teagasc's Pig Development Department, gave an overview of the project's goals, methodology, and current status.

It was emphasised that WelFarmers is a farmer-led initiative — created *by* farmers and promoted *for* farmers — aiming to give pig producers across Europe a voice in shaping future legal requirements. The project empowers farmers to become drivers of change, rather than simply responding to societal expectations. The

Commission is now eagerly awaiting the outcomes of the first evaluation round.

What's Next?

By end of August 2025, the winners of the first round of evaluations will be announced, and promotion of their practices will begin across the project's platforms.

Starting in September, Round 2 of the project will commence. This will involve the continued collection of good practices under the same four themes.

If you are aware of a pig farm — whether in Ireland or abroad — that is implementing innovative or welfare-friendly practices worth sharing, please get in touch with any of Teagasc's Specialised Pig Advisors. We welcome all contributions that help shape a more sustainable and welfare-focused future for the pig sector.