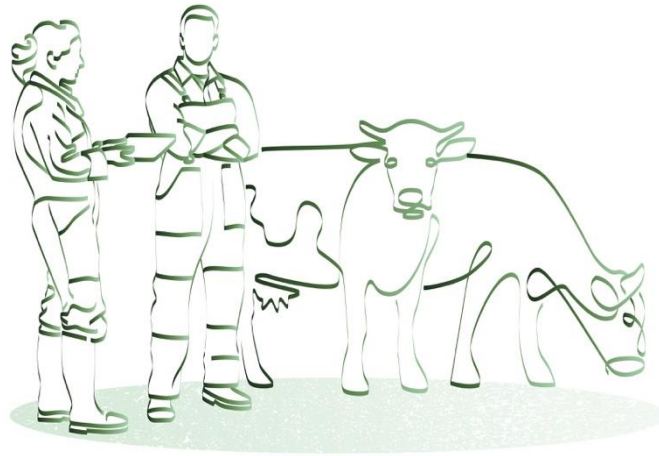


Inspector@work: Ireland



What is your current role and what are your main responsibilities, as well as how many years have you been in this role?

I'm employed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) as a veterinary inspector. DAFM is the competent authority for animal welfare. We work under the auspices of European legislation that's been transcribed into Irish legislation.

My responsibilities are welfare on farm and welfare at export. Our office is open to the public. We receive welfare complaints that are followed up by us.

There are targeted welfare inspections that we visit; our colleagues in headquarters would select certain herds that may indicate welfare problems in the herd. For example, increased mortality in calves or a herd that's very slow to complete their requirements as regards tagging and registration, can be an indicator of inadequate welfare standards. From the welfare point of view, that's one of the areas we work in.

How many years have you been in this role?

I've been over twenty years in this role. I've seen changes as time has gone on. Legislation has improved; different systems of farming have improved and disimproved.

What motivated you to become an inspector?

First of all, I grew up on a dairy farm in Cork, and it's an intensive dairy-producing part of the country. I always had a fondness for dairy farming, especially for the cattle and the animals that came with it. I was lucky enough to enter veterinary college and qualify as a veterinarian.

When I qualified, I worked mainly in farm animal practice. In that regard, I got a lot of experience on all types of farms, but I particularly enjoyed dairy farms, beef, and suckler farms most.

Why did I join the state service? I suppose the big difference between the state service and being in private practice is you have more authority and more tools to deal with people, certainly in situations where there may be resistance or there may be difficulty in trying to deal with a welfare situation. Certainly, that would have been an attraction for me, an area that I've always wanted to be involved in.

What do you enjoy most about being an official inspector?

Being on the farm, simple as that, being both in contact with cattle and other farm animals. That's a big attraction for me.

But above that, you do get a sense of reward from seeing animals being cared for or trying to influence herd owners and people involved in farming to improve their welfare standards.

We're also involved in meetings between fellow colleagues, and we have welfare meetings with our headquarters where we share information. In that sense, it's a joy meeting them as well and getting feedback from other people who do the same kind of work, which can be beneficial.

You mentioned that you go to different areas and your work is related to not only these official inspections but also exports as well. Which areas or facilities do you inspect in relation to compliance with ruminant and equine welfare requirements?

It's mainly cattle country where I work, so I don't do much equine work. But as regards ruminants, certainly, as I mentioned, it's on-farm inspections. Targeted inspections are selected by headquarters as described already and are considered high risk inspections.

And for some herds, you may receive local knowledge; people, local veterinarians, who may give us information on certain herds. Generally, it's targeted and public awareness driven, I suppose.

What aspects of your work do you find particularly interesting, but also challenging?

Over the years, certainly over recent times, it's the increased technology involved in farming, certainly intensive dairy farming. There are now bigger farms with less labour because of the expense; you have the introduction of things like automatic calf feeders for feeding calves milk; robotic milking systems for milking cows. All that kind of area. It's interesting, it's the future, but it can be challenging as well.

Another change I've seen is that there are more and more dairy cows on individual farms, but the grazing platform is much bigger. There are problems with lameness because cows have to walk much further. That wouldn't have been an issue 20 years ago. Of course, it's the evolving nature of farming, but you try your best to maintain welfare standards.

We cannot go out and say, "No, you can't farm". It really is the future, so you must try and make sure that the welfare of the animals involved isn't compromised.

Can you describe examples of best practices you have observed during inspections? You don't need to identify the parties involved; instead, just focus on aspects such as the size of the enterprise, the number of animals, or facility conditions that help to control the situation.

On farms, I've seen modern farm buildings that are much better ventilated. They have much higher roofs, you walk into them and you hardly notice an odour. That's certainly good farming practice. A lot of these buildings are funded by DAFM through EU funding as well. They're built to specification, and that certainly has improved the welfare of animals from the point of view of respiratory diseases, dampness, dry lying areas.

I've seen farmers who install scratching brushes for housed cattle, and I've seen improvements in their design over the years.

As of a couple of weeks ago, I was on a farm with a type of scratcher that, while it hung down, didn't rotate. But as soon as the cow moved it sideways, it worked. If you just stood back and watched, it was probably the busiest part of his cattle house. It's interesting to see, it's just nice to see it in action, that they do enjoy these enrichments.

Can you describe an example of an approach that was taken to address poor management practices encountered during inspections resulting in long-term improvements?

The example I'll give you is one of those herds that was assigned to us by our headquarters for a targeted inspection. The reason this herd was targeted was that in 2024, it had significantly increased calf mortality. It was quite a big herd, nearly 200 cows.

It keeps over 100 calves, so it is quite an intensive operation. When I went to visit, his housing was very substandard. He was using old houses.

What he had got in regard to technology was an automatic calf feeder, which was an improvement, but everything else was not good. The ventilation was bad, and the bedding was poor.

He told me a lot of his mortality from the year before was from diseases, cryptosporidiosis and scours. I could see a problem with hygiene and the buildup of a reservoir of infection.

The long-term solution was to build a new calf house, which he did proceed to do. There is grant aid, as I mentioned earlier; from the Targeted Agriculture Modernisation Scheme funded by DAFM and by EU funds.

He built a new big calf shed, with a very high roof.

The calves had much more space, nice straw bedding, and good ventilation. He also decided, through his own veterinary service and my advice as well, to address another cause of increased illnesses from the year before, as we considered his colostrum management might have been substandard. He invested in a refractometer and analysed his colostrum regularly to ensure that he was giving the good quality colostrum.

He also invested in better nutrition for his cows during the dry period, as another way to try and improve his colostrum. Between feeding the calves better, giving them better starts with colostrum, and providing a much better environment, his calf mortalities drastically reduced.

I think his big problem was he'd gone from 100 cows to 200 cows without expanding his calf facilities, and he tried to put calves here, there, and everywhere. Until he had to make a proper investment, he wasn't going anywhere. It was essential that he did.

He's also a young farmer, and those grants that I mentioned are far more targeted at younger farmers, which is probably a good thing as well because he will be using his housing for many years to come.

This is a best-practice example that other young farmers could follow as well.

Right! And what we have in this country also are farmer discussion groups, and he's in one of them; it's a meeting place for information sharing between farmers. Certainly, like everybody, you tend to listen to your peers more than people like me, who is an authoritative figure, maybe in their eyes. But certainly, the word gets out, things improve.

In your opinion, how has ruminant and equine welfare in Ireland changed over the last five or ten years? Can you provide any examples of changes in attitudes or practices that you have observed at a national level?

I suppose, again, it's the increase in size, the increase in numbers of animals on each farm, and fewer farmers.

One big improvement I've seen on farms is the use of vaccines. There's far more preventative medicine being used than before. Years ago, people would wait for an animal to get sick, treat it, and then maybe end up treating 20% of the herd for the same problem. Whereas I notice now, there's no resistance to vaccination. A lot of farmers have experienced the downside of not vaccinating. Again, it probably goes back to labour and labour-saving. They don't have time to be treating lots of sick animals. So they embrace vaccination, which I think is very good for overall welfare standards.

Are there any other examples specific to Ireland that you have seen in the past ten years that you can think of?

I suppose, from our point of view as authorised officers, the biggest improvement in this country came in 2013 when our Animal Health and Welfare Act, which gave us far better powers. It gave us more powers to prosecute or to serve animal welfare notices on people to instruct them to improve standards. It improved our ability to tackle problems, and it increased our powers of seizure of animals that we considered to be at severe welfare risk. From the point of view of an inspector, that, in my view, is the one big improvement that has certainly enhanced our ability to get our job done and to improve welfare, especially where there's resistance from individuals. It's been a game-changer. It's been excellent compared to what we had before it.

Does EU-level legislation on animal welfare differ from what is applied at a national level in Ireland? And if so, what are the key areas of difference?

There isn't really a difference. For instance, our calf welfare is transcribed directly to our legislation under a statutory instrument.

Where there is a bit of a weakness, I suppose, is that we have no specific dairy cow legislation, and the EU doesn't provide it either to deal specifically with dairy cows, which is a very big area in my view.

We work off the general welfare legislation that came before, I think the 1998 legislation. I find that area could probably be better.

Now, we also have different quality control schemes here run by Bord Bia, our quality assurance service, and Teagasc, our farm advisory service, which have improved standards of farming.

And in relation to grant aid that I mentioned, in order to qualify for them, we put in specific criteria that may be over and above what's in EU legislation, and that has improved standards as well.

Certainly, I think calf legislation is quite good, but dairy legislation could do with being updated, in my opinion.

Based on your experience, is there a particular area of ruminant or equine management where you would like to see improvements in animal welfare? And what changes do you think will be required for that improvement to actually reach the regulatory field?

I suppose in relation to dairy cow welfare, as I just mentioned, it goes back to the example I gave you regarding calves: specifically, in relation to proper feeding of in-calf cows during winter months to avoid metabolic disease. None of that is addressed in our current EU welfare legislation.

I've seen some of the EFSA (European Food Safety Authority) material, and it addresses this area pretty well.

I noticed some of the legislation and available material refers specifically to off-field calf rearing or indoor cow rearing. We have an advantage here in that the vast majority of our cows and calves graze out on pasture, which is the best way to have it, so any legislation relating to that area might not be as relevant to us.

But certainly, I do believe that legislation should catch up with the times as regards modern dairy farming. Now, it mentions cubicles per cow and minimum square meters per cow, which is good, but I think it needs to go to another level for nutrition and general behaviour. In these kinds of new buildings with big numbers of animals, we probably need something specific in relation to dairy cow welfare now.

One last question: which aspects of EURCAW's factsheets or other activities have helped you with your role?

The EFSA website is quite good. Your own website covers individual dairy cow feeding and dairy housing; I refer to those and find them helpful. Certainly, anywhere I can get good advice, I will take it on board, so I find those very helpful and useful.