

Animals Farmed: Falling antibiotic use, mink cull and and a factory farm ruling

Welcome to our monthly roundup of the biggest issues in farming and food production, with must-read reports from around the web



 Turkeys are seen at a farm in Orefield, Pennsylvania, on 20 November 2020. Photograph: Kena Betancur/AFP/Getty

Tom Levitt

News from around the world

There have been growing concerns over coronavirus outbreaks at mink farms around the world. The biggest so far have been in Denmark – the world's largest [producer](#) of mink skins – where there was a [botched](#) attempt at culling the country's entire mink population following the discovery that some of the animals carry a mutation of the virus that passes to humans (more on that below). Incidences have also been reported in [Greece](#), the Netherlands, South Africa, Switzerland, Russia and the US.

Outbreaks of a “highly pathogenic” H5N8 strain of bird flu are causing alarm across the European poultry sector. Hundreds of thousands of birds have been culled after [multiple outbreaks](#) across Germany and the Netherlands. There have also been outbreaks in the UK, Denmark and Sweden. The UK government has brought in tough [lockdown-style measures](#) for poultry farms, with heavy fines and prison sentences for those found to be breaking the rules.

In response to the bird flu outbreaks, Taiwan, South Korea and the United Arab Emirates have [banned](#) poultry imports and poultry manure from the Netherlands. UAE has also [banned](#) imports from Germany, Russia and parts of the UK.

Brazilian meat exports are booming and are [expected](#) to be worth \$8bn (£6bn) this year. Demand has been [driven](#) by China, where there has been a shortfall in animal protein after [African swine fever](#) wiped out more than 200 million pigs in the country. The beef feedlot industry in Brazil, where cattle is fattened on grain before slaughter, is now [expected](#) to double in size over the next five years.



 Outbreaks of bird flu are leading to poultry culls and restrictions in parts of Europe. Photograph: Tim Scrivener/Alamy

A coalition of NGOs has called on global development banks to divest from factory farming. The [call](#) came at the first-ever global meeting of all public development banks last week. In July, we [revealed](#) that the International Finance Corporation (IFC) – the commercial lending arm of the World Bank – and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) had

provided £2.1bn to the meat and dairy industry, despite scientists' warnings of links to climate catastrophe.

Chinese farmers' use of antibiotics on their pigs and other livestock has dropped, with [reports](#) that officials are taking the issue of overuse and antimicrobial resistance seriously. Observers say the [devastating impact](#) of African swine fever has led to improvements in hygiene in China's pig industry and may have helped reduce antibiotic use.

Indigenous communities in Nicaragua are being run off their land to make way for cattle ranchers, according to a [report from PBS](#), which says it is being driven by a surge in beef exports to the US. Nicaragua is now the US's third largest supplier of frozen beef. In separate news, Pilgrim's Pride, one of the largest chicken producers in the US, has [agreed](#) to pay a \$110m fine after allegations of price-fixing.

The world's largest insect protein plant is to be built in Illinois, under an [agreement](#) between US grain trader and processor Archer Daniels Midland Co (ADM) and French biotech company InnovaFeed. The facility will be built next to one of ADM's corn processing sites with corn byproducts used as feed for the insects. The UN has [estimated](#) that in future insects could replace between 25-100% of soymeal for chickens.

News from the UK

Sheep farmers have said a [suggestion](#) by farming minister George Eustice that they diversify into beef production in the event of a no-deal Brexit and the imposition of trade barriers was "laughable". The UK is the largest producer of lamb in the EU and most of it is exported. Farmers said they wouldn't be able to restructure their business by January.

UK farm antibiotic sales have halved since 2014, according to [new reports](#), but this masked a slight increase between 2018-19. In the UK's poultry sector, antibiotic usage has risen for the second year running, [according](#) to separate reports. Across Europe, sales of antibiotics for livestock fell by more than a third between 2011 and 2018, according to [data](#) collected by the European Medicines Agency – sales in the UK are 71% lower than the EU average.



Sales of antibiotics for livestock fell by more than a third between 2011 and 2018, data shows.
Photograph: Getty Images

Farmers in the US and UK have been [forced](#) into producing smaller turkeys this year for Thanksgiving and Christmas as the Covid-19 outbreak restricts larger household gatherings. However, the UK industry has received a boost with the news that the expected 5,000 seasonal workers arriving in the UK to help turkey producers in the run-up to Christmas have been given an [exemption](#) from any requirement to self-isolate for 14 days.

Scotland's beef farmers [could cut](#) their climate emissions by more than a third by solving on-farm issues such as slurry storage, according to a new industry initiative. The red meat industry in Scotland has [welcomed](#) the plan saying it could help show farmers how to reduce their emissions and respond to criticism from campaigners.

From the Animals Farmed series

A US judge has issued a [blistering condemnation](#) of industrial farming practices, decrying "outrageous conditions" and "suffocating closeness" endured by pigs at a farm. The judgment comes as one US meat giant finally settles after a six-year legal battle with plaintiffs who sued the company over the stench, flies, buzzards and truck traffic coming from its industrial swine farms in North Carolina. If you want to understand how the pork industry operates today then read this story on how [one of the biggest pork companies](#) in the world went bust in the midst of a market boom.

Ships carrying live animals are at least twice as likely as normal cargo vessels to get lost, a [Guardian investigation has found](#). Last November, at least 14,000 sheep drowned after the [Queen Hind capsized](#) en route to Saudi Arabia from Romania. And last month, Gulf Livestock 1, a carrier [transporting almost 6,000 cattle](#), sank off the Japanese coast en route to China from New Zealand. Forty crew members remain missing and are presumed dead.

The Danish government was forced into an embarrassing U-turn this month after [banning state canteens](#) from serving meat for two days every week. It had been part of an attempt to meet its target for a 70% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Employer unions objected to the ban.

The big news from Denmark has been its ongoing struggle to respond to Covid outbreaks on its mink farms. The government announced a [nationwide cull of mink](#) following concerns that a Covid mutation moving from mink to humans could jeopardise future vaccines. It later emerged that the [fears may have been misplaced](#) and the cull may be illegal, with the agriculture minister forced to resign amid street protests by farmers. Although fur has been [shunned by many celebrities](#) in recent years, it remains a feature of some luxury brands.



Shocking footage of “severely injured” pigs on Spanish farms has [prompted calls](#) for EU animal welfare rules to be enforced. Spain has seen an [export boom](#) and is set to overtake Germany as Europe’s biggest pork producer this year.

Finally, some more positive reports of how farmers are adapting to climate change. Farmers in Arizona are [experimenting with new breeds](#) and cooling methods including fans and misters to avoid mass deaths during heatwaves. And incentives for [wildlife-rich field buffers](#) in the US are improving biodiversity on farms and bringing new sources of incomes to livestock farmers.

Share your stories

We want to hear from you about **your experiences and stories** from inside the farming industry. Please [get in touch](#). You can contact us at: animalsfarmed@theguardian.com.

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