

Inspector@work: Alsace, France



I've been working as a veterinary services inspector with my department in Alsace in France for 3 years. It's still a novelty for me because there are always new things to be discovered.

My background is a bit unusual. I trained in agricultural engineering. After this, I worked for the national competent authority, as a teacher in an agricultural college for 7 years, then 3 years at the Direction Départementale des Territoires (regional competent authority) where I conducted cross-compliance inspections (regarding the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP) in partnership with the departmental veterinary services.

These days, my work is mainly in the cattle sector where I look after all aspects of animal health, veterinary medicine and animal welfare protection in partnership with the Groupement de Défense Sanitaire, as well as cross-compliance inspections for CAP.

Animal transport is another aspect of my work, which includes inspections before, during and after transport to make sure that the animals are properly unloaded, fed and in good condition, checking certificates of competence, rest periods and temperatures, both at European level and in third countries, for all animals in transit (this includes livestock and pets).

I've always wanted to work in the veterinary services and I've finally got there. The best part is doing the actual inspections, seeing cows and talking to farmers - that's enough to keep me happy. On the other hand, the administrative side of things can be quite onerous; you spend a lot of time in the office, for example, writing health management reports. But it's a worthwhile job, I'm involved in animal protection, and we do this by helping the farmers to do their jobs better.

Not everything in the sector is bad news

Most of the time, when we go out, it's for risk analysis. Then there are the random inspections. This is where we might check some administrative processes, making sure that there are ear tags, and they are registered etc. My experience on random checks has generally been very good - not everything in the sector is bad news. There are a lot of very conscientious people, especially the younger generations, setting up farming systems with new buildings that meet the space requirements, good housing conditions and overall, very healthy animals.

We also deal with complaints. Often it's a neighbour calling to complain about animals being outside in extreme temperatures, either freezing cold or a heat wave without shelter. In such cases, we usually start with a phone call to

discuss the situation with the farmer and offer advice. If there is no change and the complaints continue, we visit the farm, highlighting the regulatory areas that might require urgent attention and suggesting improvements for the animal's welfare.

Generally, things go well. However, sometimes animal welfare issues can be undermined by personal problems in the farmer's life (debts, divorce etc), resulting in deteriorating standards. In these cases, we tend to keep a closer eye on the situation with follow ups over at least 6 months. It's not an easy job, there can be risks, sometimes we've had to have police accompany us on inspections. As a last resort, if there is still no improvement, we either impose fines or confiscate animals to avoid creating further financial strain. Some farmers may end up with court proceedings. In the worst case, we had one farmer who was completely overwhelmed and in denial with what needed to be done. We found carcasses and skinny cows standing in manure up to their hocks. Those animals had to be confiscated and placed with animal rescue shelters.

Animals must be fed, yes – but how, when and with what?

A big frustration at the moment are the regulations for welfare of livestock in transit. We are told that animals must be fed, yes – but how, when and with what? Everyone has their own interpretation on this, with opinions varying between regions and sometimes even at a national level. It's hard to make an inspection and offer advice that will actually get listened to when everyone has a different opinion, so we're hoping to have some clarification on that soon.

When we talk to farmers, they often complain about the regulations, hoping that we can pass on their comments, but it's more complicated than that. They have the impression that these laws are made by bureaucrats who don't understand the realities they face. I understand this frustration, but we still have regulations to enforce. That said, the farmers do their utmost to comply with regulations and conditions on farms keep improving.

From my perspective, if I could change anything it would probably be to advise people against keeping the farm in the family when none of the children are particularly interested in taking over the business. In those cases, things drag on and often don't go well. Sometimes, people just need to say to themselves "when I can't do it anymore, I'll stop". There's nothing to be ashamed of in making that decision.