

Global trends in animal health and crop protection

By Mark Ross

Over the next decade, the global middle class will grow from two billion to nearly five billion. An explosive, unprecedented rise considering the entire world population was a mere five billion in 1990.

And how will the average middle-class entrant celebrate their newfound status? By enjoying a plate of freshly-cooked meat and vegetables with a newly adopted pet at their feet. This means they are relying on the animal health and crop protection industries.

They're relying on the animal health sector to help farmers raise healthy, quality animals in ways that respect their welfare; and ensure their pets can live long healthy lives.

They're relying on the crop protection sector to increase yields of high quality, nutritious cereals, fruits and vegetables – all with reducing amounts of available land.

Animals, grains, fruits and crops will be at the core of global growth in coming decades. Companies are investing billions in R&D each year to ensure we can provide the tools needed to protect them. But there are challenges to overcome. There are also misconceptions that are putting a spoke in the wheel of innovation.

A major challenge is resistance. Antibiotic resistance is a threat that can cost lives. But in the battle to protect our global health, people have an ally in close quarters that should not be underestimated: the animals at our sides.

Across animal health, the fight to antibiotic resistance is concentrated on two fronts: Better management of existing antibiotics and the development of alternatives. Modern technologies like custom, herd-specific vaccines and animal-only antibiotics are improving our ability to better preserve existing medicines.

But, too often, animals are the scapegoat when it comes to drug resistance. Research has found that addressing antibiotic resistance in animals alone does little to tackle the issue for people. Animal health must be an equal partner in this fight.

Like bacteria with antibiotics, resistance to crop protection compounds, such as herbicides, insecticides and fungicides, can develop over time. This is a major global challenge for the agricultural industry.

Fortunately, New Zealand isn't facing a catastrophe, but we need to be ahead of the game. We do this by working with the wider industry to identify possible threats and ensure solutions are available for them. Managing resistance requires an understanding of the factors that influence its development, and having strategies in place to manage these risks.

Increasing regulatory roadblocks for registering new plant protection products hinder the progress of providing farmers and growers with solutions to pests and disease. Decision-making based on political gain, rather than science, adds to the frustration. These products are too often subject to the mercy of activists touting alarmist claims in the media. Misinformation going viral potentially inhibits sensible decision-making on the registration of products that are essential for the production of safe food.

One hurdle was overcome when the European Commission and Member States extended the renewal of glyphosate in late 2017 for a further five years. This is a sensible decision that allows farmers to safely and efficiently control weeds in a cost-effective and environmentally-friendly way.

In emerging markets, navigating complex regulatory systems can, at times, be an insurmountable task. Delivering animal medicines and crop protection products to smaller markets is becoming increasingly challenging. Products with proven track records hit an impasse and progress grinds to a halt.

Increased regulatory convergence offers a solution. When countries combine the expertise and knowledge of an entire region, the result can be a streamlined system that ensures farmers in fast-growing markets have the same tools as those from Europe, America and elsewhere.

Implementation of regulatory convergence in areas like South Asia and East Africa could transform the animal health and crop protection markets and change the global balance of agriculture.

Working with our international counterparts allows us to share knowledge with a global community focussed on keeping animals and crops healthy. Agcarm does this by being active members of both the international CropLife networks and the animal health sector organisation, HealthforAnimals. Our memberships allow New Zealand based manufacturers and retailers to foster a greater understanding of global animal health and plant protection trends and activities.

To ensure that we continue to produce healthy food, we need to embrace innovation and be proactive in dealing with the barriers. Advocating for sensible science will not only support a way forward, it will provide the necessary assurance needed in a world where the Internet often dilutes the facts.

- Mark Ross is chief executive of Agcarm, the industry association for companies which manufacture and distribute crop protection and animal health products.