

Getting to grips with Johne's – make sure you get off to a good start

# Why put Johne's on the map?

Defra estimated that 34.7% of our herds were affected with Johne's disease 18 months ago. Many said this was low and on the increase. Many producers, their milk buyers and vets are now making inroads into controlling the disease.

text Karen Wright

Johne's disease causes yields, fertility, cell counts and general cow well-being to suffer. And infected animals are likely to be shedding bacteria and passing the disease on to the next generation when the disease will manifest itself a couple of years later and the whole cycle starts again.

But why is the incidence of Johne's increasing? Biosecurity is an issue here, with 400,000 cattle a month on the move. Many of these are moving into herds to meet expansion plans. Pressure on

housing, with calving pens seeing more traffic, and stretched labour resources also adds to the problem. The risk of infection is increased where calving pens are not properly cleaned out and faeces infected with the Johne's bacteria, MAP, sit in wait for the next unsuspecting victim. Around 80% of Johne's disease infections happen in the first four weeks of life.

Traditionally Johne's disease was controlled by 'test and cull'. "But this isn't an attractive option to those looking



Ben Bartlett: "High value of routine screening for Johne's"

to maintain or expand cow numbers," says NML director Ben Bartlett, who is working with milk buyers and vets to encourage Johne's disease screening. "We now have a much better understanding of the disease, the value of routine screening and how to interpret the results. Combining the results of Johne's screening tests with biosecurity assessments for the farm enables vets and producers to develop bespoke management plans for controlling the disease. Vet involvement is crucial here."

## Starting point

The starting point is an assessment of biosecurity risks and target screening high and medium risk cows – those more than two years old and with poor body condition or fertility problems or high cell counts – to get an idea of the level of infection in the herd.

From there, the emphasis is on routine screening as cow antibody responses to MAP can rise and fall intermittently. Screening every three months will increase the reliability of the results and

## Well off the starting blocks in controlling Johne's

South Wales producer Edward Thomas has been using the Herdwise surveillance test for Johne's disease for the past 12 months. This involves testing all his cows, using his NMR milk sample, every three months.

"We had a number of cows that were losing body condition and were not really performing to expectation," says Mr Thomas who runs 600-pedigree Holsteins at Cowbridge near Cardiff.

"We worked closely with our vet Mary Walters, from Park Vets, who always takes a very proactive approach to herd health. We decided that screening cows through Herdwise was a sensible route to get an idea of the number of cows affected, the degree of infection and the best control measures to put in place." The herd calves all year round. Since taking more control of the Johne's and assessing the risks he has adopted a number of management protocols worked out with Mrs Walters.

Among the measures are identifying infected cows with a red ear tag and avoiding feeding any calves with colostrums from these cows. He also has separate calving accommodation for affected cows.

"Johne's has cost us a lot of money," he adds. "Controlling it also has a cost but it's not significant compared with the effects of the disease and the associated financial burden from reduced yields, poor fertility and overall cow welfare."



Mary Walters: "Producers need to keep looking out for Johne's by screening regularly"

Mrs Walters agrees. "Edward has done well to get on top of the disease. He sees the money going out for tests but the improvements in performance are not as obvious, although long term he will reap the benefits."

She is encouraging all her dairy clients to take advantage of the milk buyer/NML Johne's initiative and carry out the 30-cow Johne's screening test on offer. "Johne's is such an awkward disease," she adds. "Producers need to keep

looking out for it by screening their cows regularly.

"Many farms cull cows for high cell counts and metabolic disorders, not realising that they have Johne's – they could have been losing money due to the disease throughout the cow's productive life without realising.

"Regular screening gives us the knowledge to do something about it earlier and minimise the risk of further infections."

## Producers gen up on Johne's and take up 30-cow offer

Johne's disease briefings run by NML with milk buyers including MilkLink, Wiseman, OMSCo, First Milk, Dairy Crest and Arla, with the support of DairyCo and Myhealthyherd, have attracted 600 producers in the first eight weeks of the



year and more are planned around the country in 2011. These briefings are geared to raising the awareness and management of Johne's disease in UK dairy herds.

As part of the meetings producers are offered a 30-cow screen for Johne's disease through NML. "The results give producers a feel for the prevalence of Johne's in the herd," says Mr Bartlett. "They will identify some of the cows that are potentially infectious and will provide the vet with a basis for a herd control programme."

Like many milk buyers, First Milk has been encouraged by its suppliers' commitment to tackle the disease. "We are encouraging our members to tackle Johne's because of the marked impact it can have on the performance of the herd," says First Milk's Lee Truelove.

"Through the First Milk Academy we will continue to roll out this initiative including essential follow-up meetings to enable members to make the most of the sound advice given as part of the initial briefings."

Quarterly screening of individual cow milk samples gives a more accurate indication of the animal's disease status

help to give a correct classification of an animal's disease status.

And this isn't an expensive exercise. "Quarterly tests cost approximately £7.50 per cow per year through the NMR Herdwise screening service. However, in the first instance a producer might use results from a 30-cow screen, at a cost of £75, to gauge whether disease is present within the herd."

Once a producer and vet know which cows are infected and potentially infectious then effort can be focussed on these particular animals without having to change the management for the whole herd – a far more cost effective route and less onerous on labour resources. |

The April issue of Cow Management will look at biosecurity in detail and also at how producers and their vets develop management protocols for Johne's disease that are based on farm specific circumstances.



Management can be focussed on affected cows