



Karen and Tom Halton consider Johne's control all part of good herd management

No herd is too large for a team check list to tackle Johne's disease

Ordered approach to Johne's earns recognition

An effective Johne's control plan needs to be run 'by the book', particularly in large herds. An east Cheshire-based farming couple has demonstrated this, with robust standard operating procedures and commitment from their team – enough to earn them a top prize in the Herdwise competition 2015.

text **Karen Wright**

Tom and Karen Halton are the proud runners-up in the inaugural Herdwise competition, run by NML. And it's no mean feat. Their 450 cross-bred dairy herd is the largest dairy herd among the four finalists. Their use of standard operating procedures displayed around the farm, to ensure consistent management by all staff, was applauded by the competition judges NML vet Karen

Bond and dairy producer and chairman of the National Johne's Action Group Lyndon Edwards.

The all-year-round calving herd is managed for high performance, health, fertility and longevity. Average milk yield is 9,200kg with high yielders milked three times a day, but maximum use is still made of grazing land.

A change in the structure of the business

in 2012 led to one of three herds being sold reducing numbers by 200. In spring 2015 the remaining two herds merged, which led to greater efficiency. "One herd and one parlour and all the youngstock reared on site was much easier to manage," says Tom.

Stricter controls

This move, along with Karen taking on full responsibility for calf rearing, has helped to progress their Johne's control plan. "We've used Herdwise since 2009 to routinely test each cow's milk for signs of Johne's as part of our NMR service. We knew we had Johne's 'grumbling' in the herd. The Herdwise results meant we could identify the affected cows."

Tom admits, though, that at this point they were not doing much more than flagging up infected cows and culling them. And this was only once signs of

scours or weight loss were detected. “We were monitoring, rather than controlling, Johne’s and the more we learned about it the more we realised that we needed to do more to prevent it spreading to other cows.”

Not ones for doing things by halves, the Haltons now have a rigorous control plan in place and one that impressed the Herdwise judges.

Any cow with a Johne’s disease positive result is now red tagged and a list of ‘red’ cows is given to the RMS technician and pinned up in the dairy. “We used to just red tag positive cows, but for the past 12 months we’ve also red tagged ‘likelies’ too, such as those with infected dams or with one positive test,” adds Tom.

“We’re being ‘stricter’ and reducing the risk of spread. Hopefully this will pay off in the long run. We have 75 cows tagged red with 28 of these having positive results and the rest may or may not be positive at some stage. We’ve been a closed herd for the past 10 years, so as long as we reduce the risks of spread within the herd we should see Johne’s reduce significantly. The good news is that we now have fewer red heifers in the herd.”

Camera in the calving yard

Reducing the risk of spread at Chance Hall Farm includes breeding any ‘red’ cow to a beef bull. All calves, across the herd, are snatched at birth. And it’s at this point that Karen’s diligent recording process comes into play.

“We have a camera in the calving yard, which feeds into the kitchen, so we can monitor cows about to calve and make sure someone is on site,” she says. “I’ve also set up a diary for recording vital information such as where a cow calved, when the calf had its first colostrum – which should be within three hours of birth – and the source of the colostrum and quality.”

Access to quality colostrum is made as easy as possible, thanks to Karen’s rigorous approach. Newly calved ‘clean’ cows, with absolutely no record of Johne’s, are milked soon after birth and this colostrum is tested with a refractometer that gives a reading within a few seconds. This milk is then stored in a yellow bucket, which is clearly labelled with the cow number and the immunoglobulin reading. Once the colostrum is fed the details are then added to the calf’s records.

The data is kept on the dairy PC and can be used, particularly if any problems

emerge further down the line. “Calves born from ‘clean’ heifers that then test Johne’s positive can be tracked. And we know, from the records, that if the calf was born overnight and had chance to suckle she could be at risk – this is clearly recorded too.

“We also have strict protocols for cleaning and sterilising the colostrum storage and feeding equipment,” adds Karen. “We wash everything at 80°F to make sure we kill any bugs. And I’d like to go a step further here by steam cleaning – something that is on my wish list.”

The Haltons have already invested in a pasteuriser, but they will still keep accurate records of the source of colostrum for each calf. “And even though we’d like to build up a bank of colostrum, we won’t use any from infected or at risk cows.”

High hygiene standards

High hygiene standards extend to the calving pens too. ‘Red’ cows calve separately and all calving pens are thoroughly washed and disinfected once the cow moves into the milking herd.

Although keeping a careful record of events and adhering to strict rules around calving and calf rearing fits into the Johne’s programme (they keep a list of protocols pinned up in the calf house for all staff to refer to), the couple regard it as all part of good herd management.

“We have a team of six, plus relief milkers and it’s vital that we all take the system on board and ensure that it works,” says Karen. “We pay our team to go to vet meetings and workshops – and not just on Johne’s. Staff training is important here.”

Looking at the bigger picture – and despite a depressed milk market plus TB restrictions – Tom wants to maintain and improve herd efficiency. “Good calf management and Johne’s control is part of this. Our crossbreds have added to feed efficiency, fertility and herd health. Longevity is improving all the time. Reducing Johne’s and bringing it well under control will add to this.” |

Top: Colostrum from cows with no Johne’s infection is collected and stored in clearly labelled yellow buckets that are cleaned at high temperatures

Bottom: All staff are instructed to record full calving and new born calf feeding details including times of feeds and colostrum quantity and quality

