

# A stitch in time prevents disease

Risk assessment and simple routine disease tests are way forward

Increased cattle movement, plus the general pressure of larger herd management, could be contributing to more disease outbreaks. Facing up to the challenges and adopting control measures will pay substantial dividends.

**A** drive to be in control of herd management extends through the dairy business at Malt House Farm, Hickling, in Nottinghamshire. John Collishaw runs the 150-cow Holstein herd with his wife Molly and son Edward and, despite admitting that time is their most limiting resource, they are all keen to make sure they know – and understand – what’s going on. This need for knowledge led John down the route of understanding a bit more about disease status. And the increased promotion of herd health plans and using milk tests to check out diseases brought the issues to his attention.

“We established our herd about six years ago having



NML disease testing (L) and disease testing using milk samples: a hassle-free service for the producer

John Collishaw (L) and Peter Orpin are both committed to a proactive disease control programme

split the family business and we took 75 cows from ‘home’ then bought in several groups of heifers and individual cows,” says John. “The original herd had been closed for some time, but we had management practices, like leaving the calves on the mother for extended periods and pooling colostrums, which could cause problems. These factors, according to our vets, placed us in the high risk category for health status.”

Not only was John concerned about the effect of disease on the productivity and longevity of the herd – both factors very close to John’s heart as he considers long lasting and productive cows to be a true monitor of his business performance – but he was also concerned about public perception and the over-riding need to supply top class milk from happy, healthy cows.

### Johne’s threat

“We were already vaccinating for IBR and we’d done this in the original herd, but the one disease we didn’t have any idea about was Johne’s,” adds John. “I thought it had been eradicated but our vets, from the Leicester-based Park Vet Group, were seeing more cases and herds were facing significant losses.”

What makes Johne’s so difficult to deal with is that the disease can be incubated in the cow for many years before it manifests itself. The individual cow milk tests will pick up an antibody response if disease-causing bacteria are released. Up until this point the animal has been carrying the disease and has been a potential threat to her offspring and, if proper controls are not in place and say colostrum is

pooled, then other young stock may also be at risk. “It’s not common, but I’ve picked up Johne’s in a two-year-old heifer,” says Park Vets’ Peter Orpin, who co-ordinated a project to assess risk and implement control measures in 23 dairy herds. “The more prevalent the disease is in the herd the earlier it will be picked up.”

### Hassle-free tests

Bulk milk samples and then individual cow samples were tested for Johne’s from the 150 milking cows at Malt House. The advantage here was that no additional sampling was required, but those samples already taken for NMR quality tests were passed on to the NML lab automatically.

“We took a belt-and-braces approach and also carried out environmental screens on faeces,” adds Peter. These all came back negative which was good news, but the story didn’t end here.

“Because the Johne’s disease causing bacteria, which are similar to TB bacteria, are not normally released until the animal is five years old or so, and because herds are driving for longevity, many will have a growing proportion in this age band. So it is necessary to carry out routine testing on at least an annual basis using individual milk samples and targeting specific cows that we know may be at higher risk.” History at Malt House proved this point. Two years after the first tests – when results had all come back negative – they got two reactors. “These were cows from the original herd and the same age,” says John. “We were surprised but at the same time relieved

that there were no cases so far in purchased animals and also that we had adopted control measures limiting any further spread.”

Although their herd is now harbouring little, if any, disease, John and Edward are no less committed to their control programme – particularly as they plan to increase cow numbers to 180 and build on yields that currently average 8,000kg at 4.26% fat and 3.38% protein on a traditional summer grazing and winter housing system.

“It’s down to awareness and observation – looking for any early signs of scours or drop in production – as well as on farm practices and routine milk tests, once a year at least,” says John.

### No excuse

“We are busy and this time of the year is no exception,” adds John, who makes sure silage quality is as good as the season allows by making their own. Calvings are from June through to August to take advantage of the higher summer milk price. Added to this, John is chairman of his milk buying co-operative Long Clawson Dairy and that role takes him off the farm for an average of two days a week. “But there are no excuses when it comes to herd health. The cost of the milk test is peanuts compared with a disease outbreak and it’s easy if we use the NMR/NML route. It certainly means we can sleep easier at night.”

Karen Wright

Figure 1: Hassle-free disease testing using milk samples

