

Johne's meetings dispel myths and encourage producer action

No more excuses

With the deadline for Johne's declarations just two months away, we spoke to a cattle vet leading the drive to increase awareness of this insidious and devastating disease.

text **Rachael Porter**

Have you discussed Johne's management with your vet yet? By October 31, all producers supplying purchaser members of the National Johne's Management Plan will have to have assessed their herd's disease risk and status, and they must also have a written Johne's management plan in place and co-sign a declaration of compliance with their BCVA-accredited Johne's veterinary adviser.

That deadline, as CowManagement went to press, was just two months away. And NMR vet Karen Bond, says that there are still some common questions and misconceptions about the disease – and the scheme – that need to be addressed if the target of signing up 95% of UK producers is to be met.

"We don't know how close to the target we are – we won't know until the deadline. But OMSCo set an earlier deadline of July 31 for its suppliers and Muller has asked that declarations be returned by September 30, so that will give us an early indication of progress," she says.

Producer meetings

So far this year, the vet team at NMR has delivered 80 meetings, plus 10 workshops and eight vet meetings, across the UK.

"Producers are, on the whole, extremely proactive. But one thing I have noticed, which is interesting and also highlights that the meetings are doing what they set out to do, is that some producers arrive thinking: 'I don't have Johne's – this doesn't apply to my herd'. Yet, invariably, they leave having recognised many of the things discussed and going home to look for, and tackle, Johne's."

Attendees range from producers who've never seen a 'full-blown' clinical Johne's cow in their herd and, therefore, think that they don't have a problem (and the

scheme doesn't apply to them), to producers who know they have Johne's in their herd but just don't know where to begin.

The former group, once discussions begin, soon realise that they do have cows that could be exhibiting signs of Johne's.

"There is a misconception that you have to have cows wasting away before your eyes if you have a Johne's problem in your herd. The reality is that those cows are the extreme – some producers will never, if ever, see a clinical Johne's cow in their herd. But that doesn't mean that the disease isn't there. It's very good at hiding and causing a lot of damage while remaining undetected."

Johne's symptoms

Typical signs, outlined by Dr Bond during meetings and discussed by delegates, include poor yields, mastitis and high SCCs: "Often with no real explanation. But producers don't tend to take a step back and look beyond that. If they did, they'd start to think about



Karen Bond: "The meetings have helped to demystify the disease for some producers"

whether it could be Johne's disease. This presents, typically, as an underlying disease. That's why it's so problematic." At the other end of the scale, there are producers who know that they have a problem but they just don't know where to start. "It seems insurmountable, so they just do nothing."

Dr Bond says that it is, indeed, a difficult disease 'to get your head around'. "It's complicated and there's no 'black and white' when it comes to Johne's. And it's certainly not something that can be dealt with overnight. This can be daunting.

"So the role of the meetings – and indeed the scheme – is to help to demystify the disease and make tackling it more straightforward. It's a case of one step at a time. But all the steps, if producers

Eye opener: once meetings begin, producers often realise that they have a Johne's problem





On-farm workshops: delegates benefit from discussions and sharing their experiences

stick with them, will eventually result in disease control.”

Dr Bond says that it’s rare to find a producer who doesn’t take something home from the meeting. “They provide a forum to speak to other producers and to find out how they identified a problem and also pick up some practical tips on how to take steps to manage the disease. Many leave feeling more positive about tackling the disease because they are armed with the knowledge and the tools to begin taking back control.

“Three key issues come up at every meeting,” says Dr Bond. The first is segregating high risk cows at calving. Producers say it’s difficult – they worry about the practicalities. They fear that finding additional space and facilities will be a problem and think that they will need a whole new building to house these cows.

Lateral thinking

“But often the solution is much simpler than that and just requires a bit of lateral thinking. In year-round calving herds, the number of high risk cows that need to be segregated at any one time is usually very small, so just a pen is all that is required.

“Even in herds with a bigger problem, considering the timing of when your replacements are born can provide an easier route to a safe calving environment.”

Dr Bond says that the second most common concern, when it comes to

tackling Johne’s, is knowing when to cull a high-risk cow, particularly if she’s what producers would call ‘at the point of profit’ – in other words, in calf or just calved and milking well. “Producers talking among themselves reveals the solution – don’t put her back in calf and then the decision is made for you.

“It also helps to focus on the huge risk that the animal poses to the rest of the herd if she does calve. That should also be enough to spur you on to cull – even if she is a good milk producer.”

The third excuse for doing nothing – an old chestnut, according to Dr Bond – is when producers say that they don’t trust the Johne’s test.

“Confusing test results are often cited at meetings for inaction and also for keeping high risk cows. So one of the first things I do is set the record straight here.

“It’s not the test, it’s the cow – or rather the disease. Many cows will test positive for Johne’s and then test negative in a follow up test.

“And that’s because they are constantly at war with the disease – the cows are trying to fight it. And it can lay dormant. It behaves a lot like bTB in that respect.” She says it’s important that producers understand how the disease behaves and manifests. It will often show itself, in the test, when the cow has been under a period of stress, such as a difficult calving or a tricky transitional period.

“If a follow-up test comes back negative, it doesn’t mean that the disease has

Johne’s surveillance on the rise

NMR has reported an increase of 11%, for the year to June 2018, in the number of dairy units on regular Johne’s surveillance through its HerdWise screening service.

The number of milk samples tested each month has risen by 15% compared to 12 months ago.

This is a strong indication that a greater proportion of UK milk production is now being screened for the disease.

Producers can opt to use NMR recording samples for quarterly Johne’s testing by calling NMR customer services on 03330 043 043, or by emailing customerservices@nmr.co.uk

gone away, it just means the cow is dealing with it again. It’s still there, just waiting for its next opportunity. These cows often show other health issues, such as high SCCs and mastitis, and are culled because of this. And that’s why so many cows never go clinical with Johne’s.”


Assessing risk

Another key message is that it doesn’t have to be an expensive disease to tackle – wholesale changes to management are often unnecessary.

“There are simple steps that producers can take that cost little, if anything, to make and will make a huge difference,” says Dr Bond. “It’s all about targeting those areas that make the biggest difference first.

“And this declaration, assessing risk and putting a good plan in place, sets producers up to begin their Johne’s control journey. It doesn’t have to be perfect from the start and producers can go at a pace that suits them. But they must be seen to be taking steps in the right direction.”

She stresses that Johne’s management is a long-term commitment and that it can take many years to see big improvements. “It’s definitely an ongoing approach that requires an annual review, to make sure the herd is still moving in the right direction.” |

 To find out more about the scheme, visit <http://www.actionjohnesuk.org/>