

Tough actions on Johne's reap rewards in cow health – and prizes – for dairy herds

# Top herds rise to the Johne's challenge

Around 40% of NMR-recorded herds are now screened for Johne's disease. The results enable accurate control plans and on-farm protocols to be implemented to minimise further infection. The winner and runner-up of this year's HerdWise competition are top examples of what can be achieved.

text **Karen Wright**

**T**ightening on up calving protocols as part of their Johne's disease control plans has helped to nudge Tim and Louise Downes into top place in this year's NMR HerdWise competition. Two years ago they were runners-up.

The competition looks for best practice when it comes to controlling Johne's in dairy herds and the Downes' new heifer calving area impressed the competition judges.

"This spring we created a new calving area just for heifers so we can calve them away from the rest of the cows," says Tim. "They are unknown quantities at this stage, as far as Johne's is concerned. Once they join the milking herd and start their quarterly HerdWise milk tests we will build up a picture and have a good idea of their status."

## More cows

And there's no room for complacency for this organic dairy business, which is also stepping up in terms of cow numbers and scale. The 250-cow Norwegian cross Friesian herd has been joined by a second herd on a new site made up of 95 Holsteins and 50 Shorthorn cows – both from organic systems – during the past 12 months.

"Both new groups of cows had Johne's herd test records, but they have not been individually screened until joining us," says Tim. "We need to bring them up to our level and know just where we are." Tim and Louise are keen to maintain

their current Johne's status, having recorded good progress since they started testing each cow quarterly through HerdWise in 2012. They implemented careful control protocols with the help of their vet Nathan Loewenstein, from Shropshire Farm Vets. The number of cows at high risk and classified as 'red' cows in their herd has fallen from 10% to 1%.

"We've taken a tough line on Johne's control during the past five years and the whole dairy team here is committed to our control protocols," adds Tim, who



Tim Downes, Nathan Loewenstein and Louise Downes

recognises Louise and her team's scrupulous efforts with calf care and colostrum management. "We record the source and recipient of each batch of colostrum. Everything is fully traceable." But Tim acknowledges that Johne's control starts with the breeding plans and calving management. "We avoid breeding from any 'red' cows and look to remove them from the herd fairly quickly," he adds, agreeing that this is particularly gruelling with young cows or heifers. "And if a heifer has consecutive high test results we will not keep her

*New cows in the Downes's herd will be individually screened to bring all cows to the same level*





Andrew Harrison and Vicky Harrison-King

progeny as a herd replacement. We take a hit here, but we consider it worth it. One day I hope we can say that we're a Johne's-free herd. But we're also thrilled to see our efforts to date rewarded through the HerdWise competition." HerdWise competition runners up Vicky Harrison-King and husband Andrew Harrison also view their success as a great reflection of their efforts to reduce Johne's disease in ACF Drax Farm Dorset's 270-cow Holstein herd.

### Vet involvement

"We've worked closely with our vet Emily Gascoigne, from Synergy Farm Health, to develop our Johne's management plan," says Vicky. "The whole team here looked at the areas that could pose a risk of infection, particularly to our replacement heifers, and we've got a clear plan to follow."

Recognising that Johne's positive animals can infect their calves via colostrum and also via the uterus, the ACF Drax team at Millers Farm, in Wareham, manage both daughters and granddaughters of high- or medium-risk Johne's cows as Johne's positive. They

Louise Downes ensures scrupulous calf care from birth



Two sets of calving equipment at Drax Farm

are identified with a blue tag, are only bred to a beef bull and are calved away from the rest of the herd.

"Colostrum from these animals is never used in the pooled colostrum supply," adds Vicky. In essence the 'red' (high risk) and 'amber' (medium risk) animals and all their daughters are considered high risk and are prioritised for culling." Heifers classified 'green' based on their quarterly HerdWise screening results, so low risk, are the herd's source of replacements and are preferentially served with sexed semen to maximise the opportunity for breeding high genetic merit, Johne's free animals.

Also runner-up in 2016, Drax Farms has continued to review its Johne's management and made changes.

"We have added a second set of equipment solely for our Johne's cows and colour-coded feeders to avoid cross-contamination," explains Vicky. "And we have improved our labelling of pens and introduced a new 'Johne's' board in the office so we can all keep up to date with progress, including our relief milkers," she adds. "Accurate communication and records are vital."

### Enforced biosecurity

The herd is closed with the exception of the biannual introduction of a bull that is sourced from herds with known Johne's status. If this isn't possible, then the bull is isolated and tested. Strict biosecurity controls are enforced. Bulls do not come into contact with neonatal calves or the Johne's free calving boxes and equipment. They would only have contact with bulling heifers when the risk for infection has reduced.

And biosecurity at Drax Farms extends to land work too. "All the slurry used on pasture is from the home farm and used exclusively on non-grazing, arable land and we insist that contractor equipment is impeccably clean on arrival."

These protocols have contributed to progress in this all-year-round calving herd with a reduction in 'red' cows of 75% since they started using HerdWise in 2012. In July 2017 just 4% of cows were classified as high risk.

"We believe that our early warning system – managing progeny from Johne's cows as high risk – is having a major impact on our success here. And our whole business approach means that we hope the future is 'green', as far as Johne's is concerned, at Millers Farm." |