



Give Your Herd the Health CHeCS

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The launch of CHeCS gives every cattle owner the chance to participate in an industry-led programme to monitor and improve the health and welfare of the national herd.

Launched in December 1999, Cattle Health Certification Standards (UK) or CHeCS is a new body. Its primary aim is to advance the health and welfare of cattle in the UK and improve the UK industry's future competitiveness, by setting the standards for future health schemes.

While it will focus initially on four diseases, BVD, IBR, Johne's disease and leptospirosis, it is likely that others will be added in due course. CHeCS is industry-led, representing the interests of all the main cattle organisations and having been established with the aid of start-up funding from the Milk Development Council. The other bodies involved are; the British Cattle Veterinary Association, Central Association of Auctioneers and Valuers, Livestock Auctioneers Association, National Beef Association, National Cattle Association – Dairy, Veterinary Laboratories Agency, MAFF and HUK.

Sam Noble, owner of the 200 cow Deehaven herd in Cheshire is chairman of the new organisation. In 1997, Deehaven Holsteins became the first in Britain to achieve Elite status in the Cattle Health 2000 scheme. That is free from leptospirosis, IBR, BVD and Johne's disease. It was this achievement that started Sam down the road leading to the establishment of CHeCS.

"Deehaven became the healthiest herd in Britain, and probably in Europe," he explains. "There was considerable publicity and, suddenly, a new benchmark was set giving every beef and dairy farmer an achievable goal. This was a very important achievement for Deehaven, both as a leading milk producer and with our history of providing foundation stock for other herds. At the same time, the UK was starting to lag behind the rest of Europe in the control and eradication of these non-statutory diseases."

Chief executive of CHeCS is Adam Duncan, a veterinary surgeon with seven years in general practice, 28 years in the MAFF Veterinary Investigation Service and has more recent experience advising the EU on disease surveillance in Eastern Europe. He feels there is a clear need for consistently high standards across the industry if UK cattle health schemes are to achieve credibility both at home and abroad.

“Other European countries are currently well ahead in the control and eradication of the major non-statutory diseases,” he says. “In the future, they may seek to ban livestock from countries with a lower health status.”

“In addition, the increasing need to meet consumer concerns will inevitably focus interest on cattle health. While this may not be at the top of the list of priorities for many farmers in the current economic climate, it will have a huge impact on the future competitiveness of the UK industry, and let's not forget that these diseases cost money right now. The costs to individual herds of leptospirosis, IBR, BVD and Johne's have been calculated and they are substantial. By comparison, the costs of monitoring and control are a sound investment.”

The costs Adam refers to are likely to be underlying and therefore difficult to see and evaluate. Some of the costs have been calculated in the UK as follows: £63 per cow per annum for a dairy herd endemically infected with BVD virus, and £1870 per annum for a 100-cow herd infected with Johne's disease.

A number of companies and organisations, who run various health schemes and offer milk testing services to some of the main industry organisations, got together to review the situation and the concept of CheCS emerged. CheCS is the umbrella organisation that will set standards, audit and license cattle health schemes and the laboratories they use for diagnostic services, and then provide certification for herds that achieve the agreed health status.

Start-up funding has been provided by the Milk Development Council. Participating health schemes and laboratories will contribute to the ongoing costs, with each individual scheme setting its own fees for subscribing herd owners.

According to Andrew Taylor, the chairman of the CheCS technical advisory group, any organisation or individual can set up a cattle health scheme and run it under the CheCS banner, provided it is registered and meets the standards laid down.

“Herd owners who join an approved scheme are committing themselves to taking three steps,” he says. First they will be ascertaining the level of one or more of the four diseases in the herd. Then they will improve the health status of the herd. Finally, they will be protecting that improved health status by herd health security measures and certification of incoming stock.

“This is a long term process and in time we expect to see CheCS licensed schemes becoming the industry's main platform for control of non-statutory disease and UK cattle put back to the top of the European health league,” he concludes.

Many of the objectives of CHeCS will be achieved through the existing schemes, all of which were involved in the development process. These are the Premium Cattle Health Scheme (Scottish Agricultural Colleges), Cattle Health 2000 (Biopest Laboratories), ONMeRIT Milk Recording and Testing (Compton Paddock Laboratories), Livestock Services Health Scheme (Livestock Services UK), and Bovi Health Scheme (Axient). They offer either monitoring, control or accreditation schemes for all four diseases.