

Launch of Johne's Disease awareness initiative

A cross-industry initiative to raise awareness of Johne's Disease in cattle was launched at the Dairy Event 2005.

Farmers are being urged to take action to control a disease which can affect up to one-in-five cattle and is costing beef and dairy farmers millions of pounds a year in lost production. The theme of the campaign is: "Johne's Disease costs money. Don't bury your head in the sand. Talk to your vet now."

"Johne's Disease is an increasing problem," Keith Redpath, chairman of the Johne's Disease Steering Committee, told a Dairy Event press conference.

"Livestock farmers can no longer bury their heads in the sand and ignore a disease which is costing them individually thousands of pounds a year."

Johne's Disease is an infectious wasting condition of cattle that is closely related to the organism causing TB. Infection results in weight loss, reduced milk yield, infertility and early culling. The disease is known worldwide and the incidence in the UK is increasing as herds become larger and stocking densities increase.

The campaign is a joint industry-Government initiative initially proposed by the National Beef Association and strongly supported by Defra. The partnership includes representatives of the cattle industry, veterinary profession and auctioneers. Expert advice has been provided by the Scottish Agricultural College.

Defra Minister Lord Bach said: "This initiative shows how the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy that was published last year can be put into practice. This is an excellent example of how a partnership has been built between vets, farmers, auctioneers and Government to tackle a disease. Having identified Johne's Disease as a growing problem, the industry has taken ownership of the issue and led this partnership to get this long-term initiative started. Defra has been pleased to facilitate this partnership and support the efforts of the participating organisations."

In the first stage of the campaign, the British Cattle Veterinary Association has prepared an explanatory leaflet about Johne's Disease and its control. Veterinary practices will be sent a comprehensive information pack and power point presentation for use at client meetings highlighting the dangers and costs of the disease. This will be followed by leafleting direct to farmers, a poster campaign in auction marts and farmer meetings throughout the country over the winter.

Mr Redpath paid tribute to those who have worked in support of the NBA to establish the partnership and provide expertise, in particular SAC veterinary investigation officer George Caldow, who is recognised as an expert on Johne's Disease, and Keith Cutler, a practicing cattle vet and representative of the British Cattle Veterinary Association who prepared the information leaflet.

"This is an important initiative which will help the industry get rid of a disease which we know is costing farmers millions of pounds a year," said Mr Redpath.

"But it will depend on farmers recognising that it is in their interest and the long-term interest of the industry to start working with their vets, to identify what they can do to work towards eliminating the disease in their own herds."

“Our advice is that farmers and their vets should seriously consider testing their herds to establish whether the disease is present,” said Keith Cutler of the British Cattle Veterinary Association. “An animal should be culled immediately if it gives a positive test. Progress in eradication will be rapid in herds with a low incidence of the disease. Progress will be slower in herds where the initial incidence of infection is high.

“But looking to the longer-term it is well worth doing. The challenge lies in reducing levels of the disease by avoiding spread and thus increasing confidence in breeding replacements which are free from infection.”

Partners

The Johne’s Initiative includes the following organisations: National Beef Association, National Farmers Union, Livestock Auctioneers Association, Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers, Holstein UK, Cattle Health Certification Standards, British Cattle Veterinary Association, Scottish Agricultural College and Defra.

The aim of the Johne’s Initiative is to raise awareness of the disease and encourage farmers to test and cull and identify other measures that can be taken on farm to reduce the risk of infection. Improved bio-security and hygiene, particularly in calf rearing units, is seen as a major objective. Rabbits and other wildlife have been shown to contract the disease and control of rabbits on pasture will help break the cycle.

Accreditation for freedom from Johne’s Disease is available to qualifying herds through cattle health schemes approved by Cattle Health Certification Standards (CHeCS).

In addition to the economic benefits to individual farmers, the eradication of the disease is vitally important in pedigree herds, to prevent transmission into commercial herds, and will be an important factor in developing exports of British pedigree stock when export markets re-open. Johne’s Disease can halve the productive life of a bull.

The total cost to the industry of Johne’s Disease is difficult to estimate as the disease can seriously impair the performance of cattle long before clinical signs appear. The long incubation period means clinical signs of the disease may not appear until the animal is three to six years of age, although it will harbour the disease sub-clinically before then.

In the absence of a reliable test to identify the disease in younger animals and the limited effectiveness of a vaccine, veterinary experts believe the disease can be eliminated most effectively over a period of time by identifying infected older animals and removing them from the herd. The progeny of infected animals should not be retained for breeding.