

On-farm cows are Johne's Disease Level 1 accredited – the lowest possible risk level

Johne's accreditation is peace of mind for Oxfordshire dairy herd

For Chris Gasson and his family's 450-cow dairy farm in Oxfordshire, controlling Johne's Disease has meant peace of mind as well as higher value sales of surplus heifers.

Chris is acutely aware of the importance of herd health. In addition to playing a key role in his family's 850-acre farm, which supports a milking herd of 450 Holstein cows and followers near Chipping Norton on the edge of the Cotswolds, he is an assistant in his local vet practice.

In 2000 the existing infrastructure and buildings were coming to the end of their lifespan. Chris says for the family it was a case of either get out of dairy farming or redevelop. They opted for the latter and increased cow numbers from 220 to 400 over a period of years through breeding all cows to black and white bulls as well as investing heavily in housing and a new parlour.

Chris was comfortable that the way they expanded the herd through home-bred replacements would keep disease out.



Chris and Charlotte Gasson with their children, Laura, Matthew and Freddie

"While there were financial implications to building numbers more slowly – which meant buildings operating under-capacity for longer – this outweighed risk of bringing in disease," explains Chris.

"We took the lack of clinical signs and confirmed cases to mean we continued to be free of Johne's Disease. But then in 2016 our milk buyer challenged us to demonstrate we were free of both Johne's



ANIMAL WELFARE



Blood testing using CHecs protocols through the Premium Cattle Health Scheme is a prudent precaution against disease – and works out around £4 per cow

and the MAP bacterium,” he says.

“Obtaining Johne’s Disease accreditation was the most robust demonstration of this we could get, so in 2016 we signed up for blood testing using CHecs protocols through the Premium Cattle Health Scheme.”

Chris says the family spent the next three years testing all cattle over two years of age annually to eventually qualify for Johne’s Disease Level 1 status, the lowest risk level.

“This means we are as close as we can get to Johne’s-free. We still periodically buy bulls in, but always now from other accredited Level 1 herds.

“Although we are on a retail-aligned contract which requires the cows to graze, we make sure there’s no nose-to-nose contact with cattle on other holdings and double-fence where necessary. We don’t spread muck on grazing ground and ask for contractors’ kit to be clean before they turn up,” he says.

“All this means we have peace of mind about Johne’s Disease and the protocols to maintain our status. The benefits include us being able to sell excess cattle as ‘Johne’s free’. There’s no need to have separate calving facilities, or different routines for positive or suspicious cows; we can even feed calves with colostrum and milk without pasteurising it first.”



Healthy respect – Matthew and Freddie Gasson face a stand-off with the family Holsteins

Chris says the herd has also been tested as free of BVD. However they have been down with TB since April 2020 after having had 12 months clear previous to that.

“It seems that these days, most dairy herds are in and out of TB so this becomes a way of life. We always try to do more but it’s hard knowing what will work on your farm.

“By contrast it’s clearer for us to see the cost benefit in Johne’s control. This is why we went down the more committed route of blood sampling as opposed to milk testing, because it was the most efficient method of attaining accreditation for us.”

Chris says blood testing works out around

£4 per cow per year, and milk samples are £2 each so quarterly testing works out around £8 per cow per year. Both exclude sampling costs, which tend to be lower for milk samples as these are usually carried out on samples collected for milk recording.

“Milk sampling is an excellent tool when managing a herd with MAP present on farm, however blood sampling has the edge when demonstrating freedom of MAP.”

Now they have achieved lowest risk for Johne’s Disease, Chris says they can sell dairy and beef cross heifers as Johne’s free. “It’s hard to put a price on that but it definitely makes them more attractive and saleable.” ♂

Simple steps towards biosecurity

Infectious diseases are a drain on any herd – but simple biosecurity steps can dramatically reduce the risk of transmission.

Whether producers are looking to control Johne’s, BVD or TB, many of the UK’s health assurance scheme protocols rest on biosecure principles. This means that farmers who adopt them are not only reducing the risk of one disease, but all infectious diseases.

According to Sarah Tomlinson at Westpoint Farm Vets, who advises CHecs (Cattle Health Certification Standards) on bovine TB, the first step is straightforward: Minimise contact with infectious animals. That may be other cattle, badgers or deer and involves good fencing and quarantine procedures, as well as basic measures like cleaning water troughs regularly and keeping feed away from wildlife.

It’s also important to identify and remove diseased cattle from the herd, and avoid cross-contamination through muck spreading, for example.

The benefits to adopting such high standards and becoming accredited include improved health and productivity, higher value sales of stock, and a clear route to disease eradication.

For more information visit www.checs.co.uk.

