

National Lepto Month
 LEPTO
 improving fertility

In the fourth in a series on leptospirosis, we meet dairy farmers from Pembrokeshire and Cumbria and find out how they deal with the disease on-farm.

When leptospirosis strikes on your farm

The product

The product is licensed:

- Against both strains of leptospirosis
- To improve herd fertility, where *L. hardjo* is diagnosed
- To be administered at the same time as Bovilis BVD

Leptavoid™-H

Hefin Davies, Pembrokeshire

There was no single symptom which alerted Pembrokeshire dairy farmer Hefin Davies to his herd's leptospirosis problem. In fact the effects had probably been grumbling in the background long before he took any action.

But by the time his Holstein Friesians at Bryntrogan Farm, Llandisilio, were diagnosed, the disease had taken hold of his herd and severely compromised its health and performance.

"The problems had been niggling for a while," he says. "Cows were not recovering from a variety of complaints as quickly as they should. They had too much mastitis; their temperatures were up; production was down and even the calves were not as vigorous as they should have been."

"We did a variety of tests and couldn't find a thing, so were left scratching our heads," he says.

However, when the decision was taken to test for the antibodies to leptospirosis, the root

of the problem became clear.

"I can remember the evening milking when it came to a head," says Hefin. "One in every three or four cows was down in production and by the time the 130 or so we were milking at the time had gone through the parlour, I'd say a quarter of the herd was affected."

"It was really quite frightening and by the time the vet had arrived I'd pulled out at least half a dozen for attention that were hollow and off-colour."

Results

The vet came with antibiotics to treat affected cows and had the results for the leptospirosis tests.

"Strangely enough, the fact the antibody tests were positive and showed the herd was infected with leptospirosis was really quite reassuring," says Hefin. "It was certainly nice to have an answer that evening and to tie everything up."

The immediate action was to treat around 45 affected cows with streptomycin, which Hefin believes may have halted a seri-



Hefin Davies says by the time leptospirosis was diagnosed, the disease had already taken hold of his herd.

ous abortion problem, while a long-term solution was sought in a vaccination programme which would prevent a future outbreak.

"We vaccinated everything with Leptavoid-H and have continued to do so ever since," says Hefin. "Youngsters routinely receive their starter jab at the same time as the vaccine for BVD, with the follow-up a month later, a

couple of weeks before turnout."

With every animal now receiving an annual booster, and vet, Egbert de Vries from Market Hall Vets, monitoring vaccine performance through six-monthly bulk milk antibody tests, Hefin says health has improved across the board, while production – which has increased to 250-head – is nudging 10,000 litres.

"We don't get those off-colour cows and don't see the same dips in production," he says. "Health is generally good and I'm convinced when we ended up losing close to 50 cows to TB in the same year as the lepto-storm, their immune systems had been depressed by the leptospirosis and left the back gate open for TB to come in."

Kevin and Gareth Cowin, Cumbria

When brothers, Kevin and Gareth Cowin turned their Cumbrian dairy, beef and sheep farm over to organic production around five years ago, the importance of seasonal calving became more apparent to them than ever before.

A seasonal milk price of 36p/litre, which dropped to 26-27p every April, meant it was worth moving the whole herd on to late summer calving. However, poor fertility among first calvers became increasingly apparent as the tighter calving interval was sought, and the brothers struggled to get their herd to meet its reproductive targets.

"We'd changed vets at a similar time to going organic," says Kevin, "so they looked at our herd with a fresh pair of eyes."

"We knew it couldn't be right it was taking third, fourth and even fifth services to get first-calf heifers back in-calf and we were also culling barren cows as a matter of routine."

The first step taken by vet Ben Sapsford, from Westmorland Vets, was to test for leptospirosis and the bulk tank sample indicated the herd had been exposed to the infection.

However, blood tests on maiden heifers reared three miles away from the home farm, showed they had never encountered the *Leptospira hardjo* bacteria responsible for the disease, so they were facing the infection for the first time as they joined the herd.

Exposed

Meanwhile, bloods taken from first lactation heifers were antibody positive showing they had been exposed to leptospirosis as they were moved to the home farm and into the milking herd.

"These heifers were completely naïve and had no resistance to the infection as they came into the herd, so Ben suggested we put them on to a vaccination programme," says Kevin.

This involved a first vaccination in early April; a second four weeks later in early May and an



Kevin and Gareth Cowin say for their herd, vaccination was the right course of action against leptospirosis.

annual booster every spring, at least two weeks before turnout, which, on this farm, is usually planned for mid-May.

"We saw a dramatic difference," says Kevin, "and now have no problem getting heifers back in-calf to first or second service."

The farm's two herds – both dairy and beef – are now routinely protected from leptospirosis by annual vaccination for both

youngstock and adult cattle and the procedure is said to have become 'second nature' as part of the farming routine.

"For us, a vaccination programme was the right course of action, as – because the disease can transmit to man and we have a public footpath running through the farm – it has taken the risk of transmission away," says Kevin.

A further benefit to Hawkkrigg

Farm, near Kirkby Lonsdale, is the peace of mind it brings to tourists who stay in the farm's lodges.

"We already supply visitors with organic fruit, veg and free-range eggs from the farm, and are on the verge of selling our own unpasteurised milk," says Kevin.

"Now we know there is no risk of leptospirosis, we hope to add further value to our milk with a local, doorstep delivery."

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