



FRESH START: Some stock have already been imported from the Netherlands as part of the process to restock the farm – Pictures: Sarah Liddle

Farmer starts again after botulism kills milkers

SEPTEMBER last year will be ingrained in the minds of the Simpson family, from Gildersbeck, near Agglethorpe, Coverdale, in North Yorkshire.

It was then that over a three-week period, they lost 137 head and a third of their milking pedigree Holstein herd to an outbreak of botulism.

As there is no insurance or compensation for botulism, unless its source can be proved, which in this case – as with many others – is unlikely, not only do the animals have to be replaced at current market value, but there is also a loss of income from milk sales.

The outbreak was mostly confined to the new sand shed where the high yielders were housed. This has reduced production levels for more than four months and will continue for years to come.

The outbreak left the farm feeling isolated, particularly as the disease is less well understood than diseases such as foot-and-mouth, which made the situation even harder to bear.

Through no fault of its own, this successful business has suffered at the hands of an outbreak that has left more questions than answers.

It is a testament to the strength of their characters and their commitment to dairy farming that they have endured this period with tremendous dignity and a determination to emerge the other side.

DAIRY

Sarah Liddle talks to a farmer who is re-building his life and business after his dairy herd was struck by botulism

Botulism is caused by toxins produced by *Clostridium botulinum* bacteria. While these bacteria are commonly found in the environment, under certain circumstances, they will multiply in decaying organic matter – typically animal and bird carcasses and, occasionally, vegetable matter.

It is believed that even fragments of bird carcasses transferred onto pasture by scavenging animals, such as foxes, dogs or crows, could pose a risk to grazing cattle.

The source of the botulism at Gildersbeck might never be identified. It is likely that the source, possibly a carcass ensiled in the farms grass silage, was added to the mixer wagon on Thursday, September 15.

The rotation of the mixer

wagon then disseminated the toxins through the feed, which was given to the high yielders. Nearly all the animals were contaminated and, over the next two weeks, died from the disease.

Cattle are especially susceptible to botulism, which is similar to food poisoning, although the milk does not become contaminated and so poses no risk to humans.

The symptoms shown by the cattle at Gildersbeck included muscle paralysis, whereby the cows would not get up and walk out of their cubicles for milking or to eat.

When lifted, they would move, but with some stiffness. In some animals, symptoms included muscle tremors, difficulty in chewing or swallowing, and drooling and tongue protrusion – death could be sudden.

Seeing your cattle, and a lifetime's work, affected by such a debilitating outbreak is a harrowing event for any farmer.

With support and daily input from the Bishopton Veterinary Group, particularly vets Phil Alcock and Neil Eastham, James Simpson did all he could to deal with the situation.

Despite extensive tests, the botulinum toxin was not identi-

fied. The toxin is virtually impossible to identify in cattle once it has been ingested.

Its presence in silage or other feed cannot easily be identified either.

To combat the outbreak, all animals on the farm were vaccinated with a two-dose vaccine (given a month apart) from South Africa.

It is likely that the source of the toxin has gone, but the vaccination is an insurance policy for the future and enables the silage clamp to be used as a

feed source this winter.

With the backing of their bank manager, a programme to maximise milk production is in place.

A major factor in restocking has been to buy from only one farm where rigid health protocols are in place and high yields have been achieved.

However, finding sufficient numbers on one farm at an affordable price in the UK was difficult.

About 175 dairy replacement heifers have been sourced and,

so far, 70 fresh milk heifers have come from a farm in the Netherlands, following a visit by James and his farm advisers.

It will take a long time to recoup the financial losses sustained.

Botulism is a little-understood killer that can affect any farming business at any time.

There is little that farmers can do to guard against it except to avoid the use of high-risk material, such as broiler manure, on land growing grass or crops for cattle.



NEW SHED: At Gildersbeck, in Coverdale, cow welfare is paramount as this new cow housing shows

“Cattle are especially susceptible to botulism, although the milk does not become contaminated”