

LASER Leading The Way

New health scheme to be launched at AgriLIVE

The launch of LASER at the AgriLive event means that beef units in the south east of England can now take part in a health scheme which will give them added security when buying, selling or showing livestock.

Herds are awarded a health status, based on their efforts to control four key infectious diseases – BVD, IBR, Leptospirosis and Johnes – not just eradicate them. The scheme is designed to be practical and easy to operate meaning producers not only establish their disease status but can manage it on an ongoing basis. *Beef Farmer* spoke to two of the individuals behind the scheme to find out more.

LASER, or Livestock Assurance South East Region, is a three-year pilot project that is free to join for all dairy and beef herds in the region – whatever size their herd is and whoever their vet is. It is primarily funded by EBLEX and the database is run by National Milk Records with input from other organisations such as the NFU, breed societies, auctioneers and the South East's Animal Health and Welfare sub-group.

"The scheme aims to improve the health of dairy and beef herds in the region, and, ultimately, performance and farm profit. Both vets and farmers in the region were concerned that, while there was an increase in the membership of cattle health accreditation schemes such as CHeCS, many producers remained ignorant of their own herd health status," explains Matt Dobbs of Westpoint Veterinary Group, who has been been a driving force behind the LASER project.

"Furthermore, full accreditation was seen as being too difficult for the average producer to achieve," he states,



Matt Dobbs

adding that the team behind the project understands that disease eradication isn't appropriate for some herds.

"But we want to encourage farmers to understand the costs associated with these production diseases and take steps to reduce them," says Mr Dobbs. "Farmers who know their cattle health status can then reduce disease levels and losses as well as benefit from knowing their health status when selling cattle. Markets will know more about the health status of cattle being sold and the south east will have the opportunity to export cattle of known health status."

This is part of the reason why the scheme acknowledges steps taken for control such as vaccination or blood testing. It then awards herds a recognisable level of achievement: bronze, silver, gold or platinum (see box). A farm is awarded a status for each of the diseases that are monitored, with their own vet deciding which level best suits the herd, based on testing results and vaccination history.

Mr Dobbs explains that LASER concentrates on five key infectious diseases:

- Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD)
- Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR)

- Leptospirosis
- Johnes
- TB

Working closely with their farm vet, producers first identify the health status of their stock, based on historical data and using blood testing. Different levels of control can then be agreed between vet and farmer, depending on the herd, the management and replacement policy. Strategies can then be implemented ranging from vaccination, regular screening, and if appropriate, removal of infected animals from the herd. For some herds, this will involve no change to their current strategy, but with the benefit of receiving acknowledgement for the steps they have previously taken.

The scheme was farmer-driven for simplicity using some of the research gathered at agricultural shows last year by pedigree Aberdeen Angus breeder Angus Stovold, chairman of the LASER steering group. He was so concerned about cattle health that he carried out a survey at every show he attended last year with the aim of finding out how farmers record health on their units. He also wanted to find out what level of health planning they operated and whether they would be receptive to attending meetings on such topics believing that an education plan for the region was vital.

"We sell about 50 breeding bulls a year and whilst some purchasers ask questions about health status, many others don't," he says. "That was a key point that got me thinking: we should all question the people we buy stock from and those we are housed beside at shows. Knowledge is essential to plan how to protect the health of your stock."

Mr Stovold's Rosemead herd is based at Lydling Farm near Guildford. It started in 1936 and has operated as a commercial and top-end show herd ever since. After the 2001 FMD outbreak, when infected premises were within 1.5 miles of the farm, he realised that a complete re-think was needed to protect such valuable livestock.

"Herd health and biosecurity were always important to us, but we started working towards the SAC's Premium Cattle Health Scheme scheme with our



vets at Westpoint Veterinary Group. The scheme meant we formalised many of our processes and made us develop and adopt protocols for when we show or buy stock, and graze fields adjacent to neighbouring livestock."

Mr Stovold's survey, plus conversations with other farmers and vets, made him realise that many farmers simply put up with a high level of disease on their farms. "All too often people are put off by the cost of, say, £100 to test disease status let alone invest in vet time and vaccinations. This is false economy in our experience because diseases such as BVD or Johne's are like a dripping tap – they cost you money by affecting stock health."

In fact, the five infectious diseases covered by the scheme are not highly visible diseases – but they are extremely expensive, warns Mr Dobbs. "With BVD, few herds see textbook abortion storms because most herds these days (more than 80%) are endemically infected. Instead, this virus affects an animal's immune system, making

other diseases more common and severe. Dairy cows suffer from more mastitis and lameness, breeding stock experience more early embryonic deaths, while fattening cattle may be more susceptible to pneumonia which has long-term effects on growth rates."

Mr Dobbs goes on to explain the impact of some of the other diseases covered by the scheme. "IBR causes severe respiratory disease leading to pneumonia and abortion. Some animals carry the virus for life and it's re-activated after stressful situations such as transport, calving or mixing social groups. Most signs of Leptospirosis in a herd are subclinical: infertility, depressed yield, with abortion in heifers or older cows with waning immunity. Johne's is the ticking time bomb of diseases: young animals are infected, but the symptoms of diarrhoea and dramatic weight loss occur in older cattle, at the peak of their production," he says.

One crucial fact emerging from Mr

Stovold's research was that farmers who work closely with their vet attach more importance to livestock health. He strongly believes that a vet should be part of a farm team. "Pick their brains when they are on the unit and allow them to look at all aspects of herd performance. We make our vets work when they are with us: there is always a constant stream of questions and discussion. Viewing them as a member of the team has paid off." □

LASER Disease Status

Bronze = unknown status or active infection

Silver = some steps taken to control disease eg vaccination

Gold = further steps taken to control disease eg screening and vaccination

Platinum = herd is accredited free

NB: To achieve Gold or Platinum the farm must be in one of the CHecS accreditation schemes.

www.laserlivestock.org.uk