

Farmers in the dark

Cattle breeder and Royal Show judge Angus Stovold, who has the Rosemead Aberdeen Angus herd at Shackleford in Surrey, is spearheading a £20,000 project to improve animal health.

Mr Stovold has targeted large commercial breeders and smaller enthusiasts at six big shows during

summer 2008. He has also spoken to commercial farmers who don't patronise the showing circuit at a series of winter meetings organised by the NFU.

The idea behind the project – which is funded by SEEDA, the development agency – is to improve the health status of breeding stock across the region.

Mr Stovold argues that the marketing advantages are obvious, particularly with cattle diseases such as Johne's on the increase – highlighted in last month's South East Farmer .

Mr Stovold surveyed cattle, sheep, pig and small poultry breeders to test awareness. His questionnaires asked producers about their approach to animal health and any precautions they

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Angus Stovold

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are taking to safeguard it.

The questionnaire established how long the farmer had been in business. Mr Stovold said: "On the beef side, I spoke to 63 farmers. The vast majority (85%) were experienced and five who had been in business for less than 15 years were young but had good knowledge. Being typical beef producers, there was a real mix of farm sizes, reflecting the type of people who show pedigree cattle.

He explained: "Of those questioned, almost half (43%) did not have a health plan. A health plan is not yet a cross compliance requirement – although it could be in the future – so farmers are not operating under the radar where legislation is concerned. But vets should have a duty in helping to prepare health plans. This project will now take action. Vets will be asked to join a regional health scheme and prepare health plans for all livestock keepers."

He asked beef producers if they knew their health status. The majority (82%) answered "yes" but Mr Stovold believes that in reality only 31% truly knew their status. Although many claimed to blood test for existing diseases such as bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) or infectious bovine rhinotracheitis, in the main farmers weren't screening their animals for a range of diseases.

"If there is a problem such as

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abortion, do they test for specific problems? A quarter of those who said 'yes' were in a scheme and tested for all diseases."

Mr Stovold advocates blood testing and isolation for those who show their animals or is bringing animals onto their farm. The cost of blood-testing a handful of cattle could be under £100.

BVD is a case in point. He cites an example of an in-calf heifer that picks up the virus at a show – it is only 18 months later that the effects begin to be felt on the farm. The disease impact on a 100 cow suckler herd is abortion, reproductive/ conception problems and mucosal disease. The cost, without disease control, could run to £50,000 over a decade, compared with a vaccination cost of £1,900 over ten years and no disease.

After asking people if they knew their health status, Mr Stovold asked: "Would you like to know your health status?" The number answering "yes" did not tie up with the number claiming to know their health status. "The results suggested that almost one third of beef farmers think they know their health status but clearly do not. Are they the ones passing on disease?

"A region wide 'known health

status' would improve this situation. Buyers of breeding stock must ask sellers for health certificates... insist on blood tests."

Mr Stovold spoke to breeders with closed herds and those who buy in. He focused on BVD during his winter talks. "It's the disease that is most commonly caught by herds where animals have been introduced. Three farmers I spoke to had also experienced Johne's disease in their herds."

Johne's disease is difficult to control because it has a long incubation period and animals can pass on infection before they show any clinical signs. Vaccination does reduce clinical cases and overall losses. But considerable dedication is needed to eradicate the disease altogether. A strategy for eradication must be based on the identification and removal of infected animals by culling and a testing regime. There is no single reliable test so a combination of blood testing and faecal examination every six to

12 months is necessary, coupled with strict biosecurity measures. Two consecutive herd negatives will indicate eradication.

Most beef farmers were also found to isolate cattle after showing and also new animals that they had brought onto the farm. But he was disappointed to learn that although 85% isolated, 61% did not blood test incoming stock. A minority didn't bother to isolate incoming animals at all.

Thirty farmers (more than half of those questioned) had brought animals onto their farms that were found to carry disease. Eleven found that the disease spread and nine of them have suffered serious economic losses. Mr Stovold commented: "Why have many bought in disease when they appear, on the surface, to be well informed and carry out blood testing and vaccination for certain diseases? The figures speak for themselves."

The next stage of the project will be to devise species specific, guides that spell out the costs of disease. They will cover common diseases, signs of disease and routes of infection, prevention and control. Mr Stovold can be contacted via angusstovold@hotmail.com or on 01483 811814.