Bovine TB: new scheme to get to grips with morale-sapping disease

THE QUESTION FOR CATTLE veterinary practices is: which clients are currently part of the Cattle Health Certification Standards (CHeCS) for John’s Disease, IBR, BVD, Leptospirosis or Neospora? And a second question: have those herds never had a bTB breakdown? There are around 14,000 cattle herds that are involved with CHeCS (60% beef and 40% dairy) and 35,000 herds that have never had a bTB breakdown. As CHeCS accreditation involves biosecurity, it seems important to know whether these herds are within the bTB-negative group.

As CHeCS bTB herd accreditation involves a veterinary surgeon working with a farmer to prevent bTB entering a herd, it would be a way to increase confidence if biosecure CHeCS herds were also included in the “never had bBb” group.

The number of CHeCS herds has increased steadily over the past decade. The involvement of CHeCS biosecurity has therefore also been increasing so it is a little unfair to expect participating herds to be in the “never had BbB” list, but they could be expected to be within a BbB improvers list. Only veterinary practices will know this.

At present there is no computer link between the CHeCS herds and the DEFRA TB database. There will be, as CHeCS bTB participants will be encouraged to allow their TB data to be disclosed. At the moment it is up to practices to look into their own client disease and control information.

The Minister, George Eustice, launched the CHeCS bTB Herd Accreditation scheme at Lactadense Farm in South Gloucestershire. Mike King has a herd of some 600 dairy cows and as his vet, Tom Oxtoby of the George Veterinary Group in Malmesbury explained, the herd is bTB-gluite by TB.

On scheme launch day the farm was carrying 1,100 head including 80 extra stock because of the difficulties in selling animals while under TB restriction. The herd is managed on two sites and it takes two days one week to test the cattle every 60 days and two days the next week.

Mike King commented that without yokes in the feeding area, where cattle are held by their necks in a row, the job would be “near impossible”. He, like many other farmers, is just fed up with the disease and observes that we “get numb to TB”. As an aside, while the speakers, introduced by Tim Brigstocke, were standing next to the milking parlour and the Minister was explaining his enthusiasm for the control of bTB, a cow had managed to barge through a gate at the rear. Un-noticed by the Minister and the others, she was advancing on the rear of the party. Before the headline “Minister trampled by TB cow” was to go viral, with the BBC filming the proceedings, the farmer slowly backed away from the official group, quietly ushered the cow back to the others and there was no drama.

RICHARD GARD reports on the launch of the CHeCS bTB Herd Accreditation Scheme and hears the views of the Minister and both veterinary surgeons and farmers in affected areas

Voluntary participation
Keith Cutler of the Endell Veterinary Group chairs the CHeCS technical committee and he explained that participation in CHeCS bTB is voluntary. The farmer adopts an accredited health scheme and works with his vet to establish the biosecurity requirements, as with the other CHeCS programmes. Cattle bought in to the farm are to be pre-movement and post-movement tested.

There are advantages in the farm adopting a quarantine period until a post-movement negative result is obtained. In this way, if an animal is BbB positive while in quarantine, it will not detract from the herd bTB status. Bovine TB status is a combination of CHeCS standards being met and the number of years that a herd has not had a bTB breakdown. The highest standard is 10, indicating CHeCS standards accredited and 10 years without a bTB breakdown.

For herds that have years of not having a bTB breakdown there will be advantages in adopting CHeCS standards so that a herd’s low bTB risk status can be recognised when selling stock.

For herds that have had a recent breakdown, adopting the CHeCS programme will enable progress with bTB controls to be supported. Training is ongoing for veterinary surgeons to assist with biosecurity options and utilise the herd breakdown information being made available by DEFRA.

The wider picture is that, as the Minister pointed out, this CHeCS initiative is part of the whole disease control package being rolled out by the Government. A consultation on herd biosecurity is currently being carried out.

Andrew Cobner, president of the BCVA, explained that the CHeCS TB module is designed to help the herd stay clear of disease. Biosecurity measures that are applicable to a herd situation will only need to be incorporated: it is not a “one size fits all” tick box. This approach minimises the cost to the farmer while maximising the effectiveness.

Having worked for many years within a high incidence TB area, Andrew recognises that “TB can sap the morale of both vets and farmers”. All too often he has been confronted with the view that there is little or nothing that can be done to control bTB.

His passionate stance is that farmers and veterinary surgeons would not accept this view with any other disease so it is time to fight back against bTB. He recognises that the Government is willing to embrace all the measures necessary to fight the disease and that there is a comprehensive plan across the UK.

Increased biosecurity and risk-based trading are part of the plan and the CHeCS scheme is “leading the way”, he said.

A major plus
Within the “high risk” TB area, it was pointed out that 40% of the 9,000 herds have never had a bTB breakdown. Another 15% have not had a breakdown in the last five years. In consideration of the CHeCS bTB accreditation, this is seen as a major plus for those herds and a great starting point for veterinary practices to engage with clients.

The number of herds with a good bTB history increases to 78% in the “edge” area, with 95% of herds in “low risk” being in the “never had bTB” group. In order to trade into the other areas, CHeCS accreditation would seem to be a beneficial step.

Since the launch there has been some publicity that has linked the CHeCS scheme with badger control. This is an unintended consequence but it seems worthwhile to consider carefully what can be learned from these bTB un-blighted herds.

What sort of herds are they? It would be very interesting to know whether any dairy herds are included. Dairy herds have greater soil fertility and greater availability of food for badgers. It is expected that a dairy farm will have a higher badger population.

It may be, however, that all of the 9,000 are small beef herds that only have stock for short periods. The ongoing clarification for individual herds is whether their control needs to be targeted at cattle-to-cattle infection transfer, or badger-to-cattle, or both. For long-term bTB breakdown-free herds, they may be able to eliminate one or both considerations.

County data from TB statistics have been requested. The “high risk” area stretches from Cornwall to Cheshire and it would be helpful to have a more local flavour to the figures.

For the farmer and his vet, a score of 0 indicates that the herd has had a breakdown within the past year and 1 to 9 corresponds to the years since the herd regained OFT (officially TB-free) status after a breakdown. A score of 10 is as good as it gets. Each herd has an annual review of status and hopefully moves up the scale.

Further information about the bTB scores and aspects of accreditation are available at www.checs.co.uk and the source for the latest disease control information is at www.tbhub.co.uk.