Protecting Herd Health

Every year cattle farmers lose millions of pounds through disease. A bit of planning can help to limit the damage.

This guidance leaflet is the first in a series MAFF is preparing with the help of farming, veterinary and conservation organisations. It suggests some simple precautions you can take against bacterial and viral infections: diseases as different as Johne's disease, leptospira, tuberculosis, BVD, IBR and salmonella.

All of these:

- cost farmers money;
- prevent produce going to market in peak condition;
- disrupt farming efficiency;
- harm animal welfare
- cause stress and anxiety.

Disease can strike for several reasons, and the best protection against some infections may be less effective against others. However, all these diseases are spread by the movement of germs between animals. Take a common sense approach and you can help to reduce the chances of infection.

Many of the suggestions in this leaflet are simple precautions of the sort that can easily be overlooked. Some may not be practicable on your farm. Think through what you could do, and talk to your veterinary surgeon.

Nothing in this leaflet overrides the need to comply with legal requirements.
Planning to avoid disease

Cattle should have adequate quantities of a wholesome diet at all times. If any stock are not thriving, always ask yourself why not. Get advice from your nutrition adviser or veterinary surgeon.

Apart from diseases which spread from mother to calf, most diseases are caused by bacteria or viruses which spread by:

- breathing air contaminated by infected animals,
- eating or drinking contaminated food or water, or
- direct contact with infected animals, for example at ring feeders.

To stop the spread of disease you must restrict your cattle’s exposure to contaminated air, feed and drink. This means planning ahead. You know your farm and its disease problems better than anyone else. Read the rest of this note and think whether you are doing all you can to reduce your losses from disease. Talk to your veterinary surgeon and other farmers. Only you can decide which ideas might be useful on your farm. Make a written policy and keep records.

Signs of Disease

- get veterinary advice at the first sign of illness in your herd
- you must tell your veterinary surgeon or the local Animal Health Divisional Office immediately of notifiable diseases and abortions in cattle

Keep your cattle apart from other cattle

Every effort should be made to eliminate contact between neighbouring groups of cattle. Good husbandry practices include:

- stop nose to nose contact through the use of sound fencing
  - well maintained electric fencing can be an effective low cost solution
  - double fencing 3 metres apart or solid partition 3 metres high
  - six feet wide unbroken hedge or ditch
  - barriers in gateways to stop contact with passing cattle
• check your fencing regularly and keep it in good repair
• avoid common grazings if you can
• whenever possible, breed your own herd replacements or use artificial insemination
• avoid introducing infection when you buy stock
  • consider moving to a closed herd system (a further guidance leaflet is being prepared)
  • try to buy cattle from disease free sources
• check the health of hired bulls

Feed and Water

Bacteria and viruses can be spread by contaminated feed and water. Reduce this risk for cattle:

• keep feed dry and clean
• rotate stocks of feed to ensure the oldest is used first
• discard old feed
• discard feed contaminated with urine or faeces
• regularly clean out feed bins and troughs - wash and disinfect
• clean out and disinfect water troughs regularly
• make sure animals and birds cannot gain access to feedstores
• use troughs to feed animals - try not to let feed fall and remain on the ground
• feed and water troughs should be smooth sided and their lips should be a minimum of 80cms (30 inches) off the ground
• mineral blocks should be secured well off the ground
• use mains water for livestock wherever you can
• where possible, fence off watercourses that other stock have access to
• fence off stagnant ponds
Hygiene

Good hygiene requires constant effort by farmers, farm workers and all visitors

- **Draw up a written policy.** Make sure you and your workers stick to it, and explain it to visitors
- **Regularly clean and disinfect:**
  - all equipment used in contact with your cattle
  - any hired/shared equipment
  - buildings used to isolate animals
- **clean and disinfect all equipment and buildings after any disease outbreak**
- **clean and disinfect vehicles after transporting any animals**
- **clean and disinfect buildings after use by livestock**
- **wear clean overalls and footwear**
- **wash hands before and after handling cattle**
- **insist all workers/visitors use foot dip which is changed regularly**
- **park vehicles to avoid contact with livestock**

Isolating animals

Providing facilities to isolate stock may protect the rest of your herd. Isolation facilities allow disease symptoms to develop and tests to be carried out without endangering other animals. A further guidance note is being prepared. It is suggested that you:

- **isolate all bought-in animals and look for signs of disease**
- **isolate sick animals at first sign of illness and check all the other animals in the herd**
- **remember that animals with notifiable diseases may need to be isolated immediately by law**
- **put isolated cattle through milking parlours last, and then disinfect**
Slurry

Infections can survive in slurry so care in the way slurry is stored and used can reduce the risk of spreading infection. Currently accepted best practice is:

- store for at least four months before use
- spread on arable land rather than grass for conservation, and avoid land for grazing if you can
- spread slurry without spraying it- e.g. use an inverted spreading plate
- avoid using hired/shared spreaders if possible
- spreading of sewage sludge is regulated by law. If you are uncertain about using sewage sludge you should speak to your water company or the Environment Agency.

Wildlife

Many wild animals can spread disease. Birds can spread salmonella. Rodents and other animals can also pass diseases to your cattle. Badgers are implicated in the spread of TB.

To prevent infection from wildlife you should

- ensure that you have adequate rodent control
- keep animals and birds away from feed stores
- dispose of all waste feed securely in a manner which will not attract pests
- keep your buildings in good repair so that animals and birds cannot gain access
- keep doors and windows shut when not needed for ventilation
- net windows