Healthy animals – healthy profits

Farm health planning is not new. Many farmers are already planning for the health of their livestock and reaping the benefits. Proactive farm health planning can offer real benefits for you, both in terms of the health of your livestock and the profitability and sustainability of your business.

Farm health planning involves:

- Understanding how much disease costs your business each year
- Developing a health plan with your vet or adviser
- Regularly reviewing the progress of your plan
- Ensuring bought-in animals do not pose a disease risk to the existing animals

For more information on farm health planning visit: www.defra.gov.uk/fhp

To find out more or get involved in Farm Health Planning in your local area contact:
Any disease or health issue in the dairy herd is undesirable and all dairy farmers would agree that a healthy herd is a productive one. Diseases and infections can take on many forms, from the highly infectious to the subclinical, together with the more typical conditions that every herd has to deal with on a day-to-day basis, such as mastitis, lameness and infertility.

Farm health planning is crucial to any dairy enterprise. Management of herd health can affect both physical and financial performance.

How does farm health planning help dairy herds? No dairy herd is free of all diseases and some health issues are inevitable. Only by monitoring the incidence of health and disease issues can we start to assess which areas require attention. Benchmarking in this instance is crucial. When disease incidence is measured against accepted standards, we know when to intervene. An understanding of the cost implications of each health issue is also paramount. Knowing which areas cost the most money helps direct effort and resources to the most important areas.

A farm health plan can then be created to reduce the risk of introducing new diseases and to recognise and help control any existing conditions. The industry group for farm health planning is working with DEFRA and Reading university to develop a series of cost benefit models that will highlight the benefits of active health planning.

How does farm health planning fit in with regular vet visits? The role of the farm vet is central to any farm health planning strategy. They are best placed to assess the implications of health issues and to advise on how best to prevent or eradicate them.

Every farm requires a herd health plan, but this is not a document merely to satisfy the needs of NDFAS; more over it is the starting point for any farm health planning strategy. Your plan should be drawn up with the involvement of your vet or adviser and monitored and reviewed against your targets. As you manage disease levels, these targets will change.

**Farm health plan checklist**

- Identify the impact of disease and health issues on the performance of your stock
- Draw up an action plan for your control measures to prevent, eradicate or control these issues
- Monitor disease status of your herd (IBR, Lepto, BVD, John’s Disease, Neospora etc.)
- Implement biosecurity measures
- Only purchase stock from sources with a known health status

**Routine monitoring of disease status**

Equally the vet’s involvement should also focus on regular monitoring and testing for disease issues such as Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD), Leptospirosis (Lepto) and Infectious Bovine Rhinotrachitis (IBR). When herd vaccination is not taking place regularly, regular testing (eg quarterly) is even more crucial.

How should we monitor and measure the costs of health and disease? Ideally records should be kept of every incidence of health and disease. These should be assessed each month and compared to accepted vet intervention levels or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) (see graph 1). As soon as an intervention level is breached a control or prevention measure should be adopted (see graph 1).

**Farm health planning 2**

In the second part of our health planning academics, independent dairy consultant Ben Watts of Kite Consulting explains how a planned approach to herd health, working in partnership with the farms vet, can pay dividends

Measuring, managing and monitoring herd health issues with your vet or adviser will benefit all dairy enterprises.

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**TABLE 1. INTERVENTION LEVELS, BENCHMARKS & COSTS PER CASE**

**Health Status** | **Cost Per Case** | **Intervention Level**
--- | --- | ---
Pyogalactiasis (Milk Fever) | £60 |
Pseudogalactomas (Stoggies) | £87 |
Atelectasis (Rassas) | £126 |
Exploded Abomasum (IA) | £100 |
Retarding/Diseased | £50 |
Parasitic Infection (eg. Lungworm) | £70 |
Abortion | £75 |
Vigour (Off target calvings) | £300 |
Retained Casing/ Membranes | £36 |
Mastitis [Udders] | £36 |
Mastitis | £110 |
Lameness | £46 |
Gastroenteritis | £300 |
Source: Kite Culling Monitor 2007**

**TABLE 2. CULLING LEVELS AND BENCHMARKS**

**Type/ Disease** | **Source** | **Cull Rate** |
--- | --- | ---
Mastitis/ SCC/Colder | 28 |
Fertility | 26 |
Lameness | 12 |
Injury/Perfusion | 9 |
Mortality | 2 |
Disease | 6 |
Production | 5 |
Other (including; yield, slow milking, age) | 12 |
Source: Kite Culling Monitor 2007

**GRAPH 2. EXAMPLE HERO CULLING PROFILE VS BENCHMARKS**

**Source: Kite Culling Monitor 2007**

**Graph 3. Example Herd health profile**

**The importance of records**

Keeping up-to-date and accurate records of disease and health issues is a requirement of NDFAS, but historic records are vital for monitoring health and disease incidence.

**Recording reasons for culling**

It may seem strange to mention culling in an article on farm health plans, because when a health or disease issue results in culling the farm health plan has potentially failed. But every dairy herd will need to cull animals at one stage or another and equally by law we need to keep records of which animals have left the farm, so why not record the reasons why?

By knowing and monitoring the reasons for culling, and comparing these to accepted standards, we can start to understand the areas within the farm health plan that are potentially weak. By sharing this information we can improve these areas and so prevent future excessive culling.

**The true cost of excess culling**

For every animal which leaves the herd there is a net cost of about £700 to the farming business (cull cow at £300, replaced with heifer at £1000).

Accepted culling rates are in the region of 2-5% (25 culls per 100 cows). But levels have been measured at below 12% and above 45%, for a 100 cow herd this equates to a saving of £9100 (£25) or an extra cost of £14,000 (£45), a difference of £2320 a year on the bottom line.

**Conclusion**

Farm health planning is as crucial a aspect of dairy farming today as preparing the cash flow budgets or monitoring nutrition.

By gaining a thorough understanding of the health and disease issues affecting your farm and recognising the financial implications of these issues, we can improve cow health, welfare and dairy farm productivity.

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**Test your knowledge**

1 Under NDFAS do all dairy farms require a herd health plan?
   a) Yes  b) No

2 How does farm health planning help dairy herds?
   a) By monitoring the incidence of disease
   b) Comparing incidence rates to benchmarks
   c) Assessing the financial implications
   d) All of the above

3 Typically, which diseases should be routinely monitored?
   a) Infectious Bovine Rhinotrachitis (IBR)
   b) Leptospirosis (Lepto)
   c) Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD)
   d) All of the above

4 What is an acceptable culling rate?
   a) <25%
   b) >25%
   c) >45%
   d) Quarterly

£700 to the farming business (cull cow at £300, replaced with heifer at £1000)

£9100 /12% or an extra cost of £14,000 (45%), a difference of £2320 a year on the bottom line.

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**ANSWERS**

1 a; 2 d; 3 d; 4 c; 5 b; 6 c; 7 b and 8 a