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The Latest Talk on Johne's Disease from Alberta Dairy Farmers and Veterinarians

Source: Jodi Flaig, Industry Development Coordinator

A special thank you to Mike Vanden Dool, Arnold Van Os, Helen Harper, Dr. Betty-Jo Bradley, Dr. Ross Foulston and Dr. Kelly Loree for taking the time to share their thoughts for this article.

Onward and upward – that certainly is the determined attitude towards increasing participation in the Alberta Johne's Disease Initiative (AJDI). Today, 46 per cent of Alberta dairy farmers are participating and we are very excited to be approaching the 50 per cent mark. Not that we are stopping there, just pausing to catch our breath and say thank you to all the dedicated work Alberta dairy farmers have put into the initiative. We continue to strive for our goal of 80 per cent participation.

Over the past two and a half years of the AJDI, Alberta dairy farmers have demonstrated their commitment to improving the health and welfare of their animals and reinforcing the image of the Alberta dairy industry as leaders in food quality and safety. Dr. Ross Foulston of Wetaskiwin Veterinary Hospital is appreciative of the work the AJDI is doing in creating awareness of Johne's disease and the management options available. He notes that "most studies indicate a near 50% herd prevalence rate for Johne's disease". This means that of the estimated 300 herds yet to complete a risk assessment, approximately 150 of those herds will have one or more infected animals.

Some may ask why participate in the AJDI?

Certainly, the AJDI is not the first program in Alberta to address Johne's disease, but it already has the highest success rate. Dr. Kelly Loree, of Central Veterinary Clinic, attributes this to a change in program objectives - from the test and cull approach of previous programs to the AJDI objective of risk assessment and management. This change means that the AJDI gives dairy farmers a more user-friendly tool to manage the risk of Johne's disease on their farm.

Participating in the AJDI promotes awareness and education about Johne's disease and the potential negative health effects on a farmer's animals. This awareness includes collecting environmental (manure) samples to test their farms for the presence of MAP (*Mycobacterium avium subspecies paratuberculosis*), the bacteria responsible for causing Johne's disease. Partially funded through a generous grant from the Alberta Livestock and Meat Agency, the risk assessment (RA) and environmental sample results provide a platform that enables both farmers and their herd vets to revisit the current management procedures on the farm. Straightforward and quick, approximately 45 minutes, the RA particularly focuses on calving management and heifer rearing, and improving upon such areas both to reduce the spread of MAP and other fecal – oral calf hood diseases such as neonatal diarrhea.

AJDI is customized for each farmer

Mike Vanden Dool, dairy farmer near Picture Butte, says "our calves are doing better overall and they can see this through increased weights and decreased sickness." They have achieved this success through changes in management of the maternity pen and milk source for calves. Vanden Dool now keeps cows out of the maternity pen until calving time and beds the pen more frequently to reduce the calves' exposure to manure. Calves are also removed more quickly from the cow following birth to limit exposure to the cow's manure. Lastly, where Vanden Dool once fed waste milk, he is making the transition to purchased colostrum and pasteurizing milk for the calves.

Recognizing that each farmer has his or her own business management strategy or philosophy, the AJDI RA does not stipulate management changes to be made, but allows flexibility for the farmer and the herd veterinarian to determine the best course of action for the farm. Having the RA as a tool in your farm management tool box allows you to



decide what level of risk you will operate at and to prioritize any changes you would like to make based on expected success, cost, ease of implementation and maintenance.

On-farm Workshops: Great learning experience

We have found that for those farmers who wish to know more about the AJDI program, attending one of the workshops has been a valuable opportunity to discuss the program or concerns about Johne's disease. It allows the producer participants to hear the local herd veterinarian provide some background on Johne's disease, witness how easily the herd vet conducts the farm RA and also to discuss this with other interested attendees. Having hosted an on-farm workshop, Helen Harper of Rose City Dairy near Camrose says it was "informative" and as a host gave them the opportunity to gain different perspectives on their own operation from the others in attendance. Helen and Jim Harper have already made some initial changes and are considering the feedback in future planning.

Working with herd vet to interpret results

Dr. Betty-Jo Bradley, of Livestock Veterinary Services, says "by doing yearly environmental fecal sampling, we are able to measure the success of the changes that have been made on the farm to reduce the impact of the disease. As well there have been herds that have tested for MAP several times in the past with either fecal or milk ELISA testing with all negative results, but have had positive environmental samples come back. This goes to show the importance of consecutive or successive environmental sampling to monitor the disease as well as ongoing management measures to reduce the spread." Interpreting test results for Johne's disease can make you want to pull your hair out – you are not alone. MAP test results are not meant to stand alone. They are the best available tool in determining the presence of MAP and interpreting them with your veterinarian will ensure you receive the greatest value from MAP testing.

The AJDI serves each individual farm:

"This Johne's disease program is really an excellent way for each dairy producer to work with their herd vet to put a risk management plan in place that works for your farm," says Arnold Van Os, producer at Wetaskiwin. "This program has served my farm well."

If you would like more information, are ready to complete an AJDI risk assessment, or know a group that would like to have a workshop in your area, please contact Jodi Flaig at Alberta Milk (780-577-3307). I look forward to being of assistance in any way I can!



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