

LASER TARGETS THE SPOT

A new approach to managing livestock diseases is helping to promote herd health and protect values, **Rachael Porter reports**

CATTLE HEALTH

A new scheme that recognises farmers for improving the health of their stock is gaining ground and interest.

Livestock Assurance South East Region (which has the memorable acronym LASER) was launched at Smithfield AgriLive last December. The web-based scheme is free to all cattle producers and keepers in the South-East region which stretches from Buckinghamshire to Kent, and has been developed by veterinarians, farmers, auctioneers and animal health experts in the region.

"A number of farmers and veterinarians identified the need to recognise efforts to improve animal health," explains Angus Stovold, an Aberdeen Angus breeder from near Guildford and a member of the LASER board.

FOUR STANDARDS

"LASER is web-based and allows veterinarians to assess the status of five cattle diseases in a herd and award a platinum, gold, silver or bronze standard accordingly. The five diseases are BVD, IBR, Leptospirosis, Johne's and bovine TB."

For BVD, IBR, Leptospirosis and Johne's the bronze standard shows there have been no steps taken to either detect or control a disease.

Herds that achieve the silver standard are taking some steps to controlling a disease through the vaccination of on-farm and bought in stock, or blood and/or milk testing, for example.

Gold and platinum levels require the herd to be a member of a CHeCs accredited cattle health scheme. For gold, the herd must have met the requirements of a CHeCs Vaccinated Monitored Free programme or have had one clear test as part of the CHeCs Accredited Free Programme. Platinum herds fully meet the requirements of a CHeCs Accredited Free Programme.

CHeCs providers SAC, Biobest and NWL labs have agreed to waive their annual fee for a year for farmers joining the LASER scheme.

Since there is no vaccination for bovine TB, standards differ from the other four diseases. The bronze standard includes all statutory requirements associated with TB, but also stipulates that herds are not under TB2 restrictions. To achieve silver, gold or platinum status herds need to take extra precautions such as preventing nose-to-nose contact of



Matt Dobbs

neighbouring stock, wildlife proofed feed bins and have met increasingly strict testing criteria.

Mr Stovold saw the need for such a scheme when he completed a project as the South-East's Biosecurity Champion, a position he was appointed to by the South-East's Sustainable Food and Farming Strategy Board.

"I conducted a survey among cattle breeders at shows in the South-East and beyond," he says. "I found that 80% of farmers were buying animals in, but 15% of them didn't isolate new stock when they came onto the farm, and 60% didn't carry out blood tests on new stock."

Mr Stovold adds that lack of information can have a direct and large business cost. "I heard of one farmer who bought in a bull and later found it had IBR. It meant that his previously IBR-free herd became infected and he estimated it cost more than £100,000 in lost production, veterinary fees and so on.

"Many farmers have no way of knowing the status of their own herds, let alone that of animals they are buying in. The LASER scheme provides a system whereby they can independently verify the health of their cattle, which they can use to improve their businesses or share with those they are selling stock to."

Veterinarian Matt Dobbs from Westpoint Veterinary Group has worked closely with Angus Stovold to help develop the LASER scheme.

WIDE SUPPORT

"LASER is available to all farmers in the South-East and all large animal veterinary practices in the region have pledged their support for it," he says. "We hope that all cattle keepers in the South-East will be a part of it within three years."

"All the information required to make an assessment of the herd's status such as vaccination records, blood and milk test results is already available to the veterinarian. The veterinarian's assessment is then put on the scheme's password protected website and the farmer is free to share the details with who they want to. We expect that it will really help farmers who sell stock as well as those

farmers simply wanting a programme for reducing these diseases in their herds."

All three of the region's livestock markets are supporting the scheme and there is the possibility in the future that they will stage LASER sales where only stock that is in the scheme is sold.

"Once the scheme is established and recognised throughout the country then farmers may see a real benefit when they come to sell stock," says Mr Dobbs.

The scheme has been developed in conjunction with the South-East's Animal Health and Welfare group which Mr Stovold and Mr Dobbs are both members of. It has the support of the South East England Development Agency and attracted funding from EBLEX. Database and laboratory testing specialists NMR have developed the website.



Anne-Marie Nash

"The LASER scheme is attracting national as well as regional interest," says Anne-Marie Nash, the chairman of the South East Animal Health and Welfare group which is part of the region's Sustainable Food and Farming Strategy Board.

"The South-East has a lot to gain from the success of the scheme. It will help farmers to protect their stock from some costly diseases and allow them to

verify their health status when selling cattle. I hope it will also attract keen interest from livestock producers in the rest of the country and in time could apply to other species, such as sheep."

LASER is just one of a number of projects and schemes that the Animal Health and Welfare Group help support and co-ordinate. They include the Livestock Health South East training programme and a joint approach to the control of bovine TB and bluetongue, with the group already urging all relevant livestock keepers in the region to vaccinate against bluetongue in 2010.

"The Animal Health and Welfare Group brings together all relevant parties such as farmers, the NFU, veterinary groups, Animal Health's regional veterinary lead, EBLEX and training organisations so that disease and welfare issues can be tackled jointly," adds Ms Nash.

• For more on the LASER scheme see the website at www.laserlivestock.org.uk



Angus Stovold