Managing Bovine Johnes Disease in South Australia using a Dairy Scoring System

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Bovine Johne’s disease (BJD) is endemic in cattle in South Eastern Australia and mainly affects the dairy industry. In Australia dairying is primarily based on irrigated pasture and supplementary feeding of cows, rather than housed cattle.

Until February 2005, the management of BJD in the South Australian dairy industry involved mandatory reporting and quarantines to control the spread of disease from known infected herds plus within herd measures to control infection; usually a Test and Cull program and improved calf rearing systems. However, reluctance by producers to report or diagnose BJD in their herds meant the disease continued to spread.

The prevalence of BJD in Australian beef herds is very low and beef producers are concerned about the risk from contact with dairy and dairy cross cattle. The financial consequences of BJD infection in Australian pasture based beef herds are large, particularly for seed stock producers. In order to resolve the conflicting interests of the two cattle sectors, a new strategy was designed using assurance based trading principles to replace the regulatory approach.

By 2009 over 95% of SA dairy producers have enrolled in the Dairy ManaJD program and test results confirm the low prevalence of BJD (17%) in the SA dairy sector. Within infected herds the prevalence of BJD is typically 1-2% ELISA positives in animals four years and older, and significantly lower in herds undertaking control measures including Test and Cull programs. The widespread uptake of the voluntary program has enabled producers to trade cattle using the Dairy Score as a risk assessment tool. Higher scores (tested negative herds) have attracted higher prices and greater market access both within SA and nationally. This paper describes the methodology and outcomes of implementing a voluntary assurance based trading scheme in the SA dairy industry.