They tackled Johne’s head-on

This farm decided to take on Johne’s and reduce its grip on their herd... and it worked in a big way.

by Sarah Jackson

ONE month, your best cow may look as healthy as can be. The next, she may be down in milk and quickly losing weight, although she continues to eat plenty. What is going on here? Very likely a blood test will show that this cow has Johne’s disease. Some 2 million dairy cows in the U.S. are infected with the Johne’s bacterium, and the disease is on the rise. It can be a very costly problem for dairies.

But the Ripps dairy operation at Ripp Dairy Valley in Dane, Wis., has Johne’s control down to a science. Ripp Dairy Valley belongs to brothers Chuck, Gary, and Troy Ripp. The 500-acre dairy has been in the family since 1962, and the trio took over the farm and were curious to see if Johne’s was a viable option to control this disease. Since the expansion, the Ripps have had positive Johne’s disease test results. By 2006, the Ripp brothers had discovered that Johne’s disease was less of a problem for the dairy. By then, the entire herd had to have a 10 percent incidence of Johne’s disease. Since the expansion, the Ripps have had positive Johne’s disease test results.

The brothers observed that cows with Johne’s had low milk production, udders that looked different somehow, and some had baggy chins. Of course, none of this is scientific, simply their observations. Chuck said cows testing strong-positive would look normal for a week to a month after calving, still eating a lot. Then, milk production would plummet. In their observation, stress tends to bring on the clinical signs of Johne’s, the Ripps said.

According to Chuck, the hardest part of the program was when cows producing 35,000 or 40,000 pounds of milk tested strong-positive. The cows were kept until the end of their current lactation and were culled after repeated strong-positive test results. The cows were marked by putting a zip tie through the ear vac.

It can be done. A 700-cow dairy operation in Dane, Wis., has, Johne’s control down to a science. Ripp Dairy Valley belongs to brothers Chuck, Gary, and Troy Ripp. The 500-acre dairy has been in the family since 1962, and the trio took over the farm as a limited liability corporation in 2004 after the sudden death of their father, Roy.

In 1991, the brothers expanded their operation from 350 cows to its current size. A second phase of the expansion included building a new transition cow barn in 2001, which would also house dry cows, a hospital area, and maternity pens.

An unexpected surprise... A year later, Mike Collins at the University of Wisconsin suggested that the farm get involved in a pilot program, funded by the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board and the U.S. Department of Agriculture-APHIS-CS, on reducing the occurrence of Johne’s disease. Since the expansion, the Ripps had been adding purchased springer heifers to their herd and were curious to see if Johne’s was even on their farm. To be included in the program, the herd had to have a 10 percent incidence of Johne’s disease. When the herd was first tested for Johne’s, 72 cows had some form of disease.

“It was bad that we qualified for the program, but good for getting educated,” Troy said.

They immediately began implementing a Johne’s control program. The expansion and herd was tested with the ELISA test, and Johne’s cows were marked by putting a zip tie through their ear vaccination tag. Cows testing as suspects were given yellow zip ties, blue for low-positive, pink for positive, and red for strong-positive. The cows would keep those zip ties through the end of their current lactation or until they were culled. The 72 cows with some form of Johne’s disease averaged 1.5 years old and were culled within a couple years.

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Employees at Ripp Dairy Valley are thoroughly educated on the importance of monitoring mastitis testing. The brothers make sure employees, especially their nine Hispanic workers, understand this. Chuck and Troy said that their herd is largely positive every year.

They try to buy only first-calf heifers two months before freshening, and heifers always undergo ELISA testing.

“First-calf heifers seem to adapt better,” Troy said.

Marked in computer, in ear... Heifers born out of Johne’s cows are marked on Dairy Comp records. The heifer gets a zip tie in her ear that is the same color as her mother’s zip tie. When the heifer has been ELISA-tested, she is marked accordingly.

The Ripps agreed that their local vet has been a big help to their Johne’s reduction campaign. Maurer has worked with the farm through the years, making sure the siblings are following all protocols and that were recommended to them by Collins or her herd veterinarian, Ross Maurer. They try to buy only first-calf heifers two months before freshening, and heifers always undergo ELISA testing.

“It’s really easy to work with. We share all our information with him. We only work with people we can trust. He’s part of the team,” Chuck said.

Maurer was also instrumental in helping the Ripps design protocols for dealing with Johne’s and took blood and fecal samples every six weeks for ELISA testing. The vet comes to Ripp Dairy Valley every Thursday to do routine pregnancy checks and attend to any other veterinary needs the dairy may have. Their herdsmen, Tim Blankenship, also assists with all other cow health issues.

What they have learned... Within two years of starting the program, the dairy had a rolling herd average of 24,000 pounds on 3x milking with a somatic cell count of 158,000.

Chuck said he believes participating in programs such as the Johne’s disease project is a win-win situation. It takes a lot of commitment, but, in the long run, herd size is easily maintained.