

How to quit dairying when TB strikes

Dairy farmers are facing some difficult decisions on the future of their businesses, but for those under TB restriction the situation is extremely challenging. **Melanie Jenkins** considers the options

Months of low milk prices and little sign of improvement mean a growing number of dairy farmers are quitting the industry altogether. However, with the constant threat of TB, putting together an exit strategy can be hard.

"A lot of farmers are thinking about exiting the industry at the moment, but they are waiting for a clear TB test," says Alex Stevens, South West NFU policy manager.

Many farmers have spent years building a pedigree herd and TB is limiting the sales avenues and drastically reducing the value of their animals.

Get TB-free first

1 Due to the complicated process and shortage of buyers, dispersing a TB-restricted herd should be a last resort.

"Work towards a clear test first of all," says Mr Stevens. A first step is to ascertain the source of infection, by identifying whether it is the local

spoligotype or not. If the infection is local, it could have been transmitted from wildlife or from cattle to cattle. If the spoligotype is not local, it is likely to have been brought in from cattle elsewhere.

"It might be a case of getting enhanced gamma blood testing done and improving biosecurity by badger-proofing buildings and getting the silage pit fenced to keep badgers out," advises Mr Stevens. "Try to work out why the herd

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Alex Stevens,
South West NFU policy manager



FLP/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Stock must be moved within 30 days following a tuberculin injection.

is having breakdowns and then try to go clear."

Plan ahead

2 Whether the herd is down with TB or not, if there is a risk of infection it is worth consulting with Defra, Apha (Animal and Plant Health Agency), the NFU, auctioneers and vets before taking any further steps.

Planning ahead for the possibility of a positive test can make all the difference if the farmer has to sell in a set time period.

"Liaise with Defra to find out what is and what is not possible," says Mark Bromell, director at Kivells auctioneers. "If you are already down with TB, you can get started

ahead of the injection [tuberculin]." Knowing the spoligotype means you can identify potential buyers before a test, although they must be of the same or higher TB risk than the farm of origin, he adds.

Buyers also have to be approved by Defra and Apha, and have a licence issued to cover the movement.

"If the herd is clear before an injection, there is very little you can do except plan for a possible positive test," says Mr Bromell.

"Getting a framework in place can save time and stress later on.

Act fast

3 Once a herd has been tested, Apha will issue movement licences for only 30 days from the date of the tuberculin injection. "You will not know until day three after an injection if you are down

with TB," says Mr Bromell.

"The reactors will then have to be taken away from the farm and tested for lesions, meaning it can be day 20 before you are able to sell and organise who you can trade to."

The window for selling and

moving cattle therefore becomes very tight.

"Only under extreme circumstances should farmers sell under such pressures," he adds. "This is why it is worth being in touch with the auctioneers before the injection date, so work can start before the 30-day window."

Choose a sale route

4 The main sale routes when under TB restriction are either a direct sale to another TB-restricted holding or a dispersal sale. For a direct sale, a Veterinary Risk Assessment is required and Apha may then license cattle to move from one TB-restricted holding to another. Cattle must have tested clear in the previous 30 days or be under six weeks of age, in which case a test is not required.

Dispersal sales also require a

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Mark Bromell, Kivells auctioneers

MARK OLIVER, LANHYDROCK DAIRIES, BODMIN, CORNWALL

A swift – and sad – goodbye to dairy

***** Mark Oliver (pictured) was milking 370 pedigree Holstein Friesians with his father and sister at Lanhydrock dairies, Bodmin, Cornwall, but recently decided to exit the industry due to the low milk prices.

"It was not uncommon for us to have TB but we had had one clear test and already had a sale plan in place," he says. "The second test was at the beginning of August and we had positive reactors. We had close to 700 head of stock to get rid of. It was a total nightmare."

Mr Oliver was given 30 days from the date of injection in which Defra would issue licences to move the cattle to other farms with the same or higher TB risk. This meant that movement was very much restricted to the Devon and Cornwall area.

"The field of buyers was really narrowed as they had to be pre-approved by Defra and we needed buyers who could take large numbers of cows. We also had to wait for the reactors to leave the farm, which took 10 days, meaning we had 20 days left to move the stock," says Mr Oliver.

As tenant farmers, the family had agreed to end their tenancy on 28 September, so all the cattle had to be moved in the 30-day period, to allow time for a machinery sale and to pack up the rest of the farm.

"It was a terrible situation to be in. The cows made half what they would have made on the open market and because we were tenants, most of our assets

were tied up in the animals. We had spent 25 years breeding the pedigree and it all went to nothing."

Mr Oliver says Defra and his vet were fantastic, doing whatever they could, within the restrictions, to make things as easy as possible. He advises others to talk to Defra as early as possible and to get a vet on board who knows the cows well.

"If you are committed and have to sell, plan ahead with the auctioneer if there is any likelihood that you will go down with TB. Do not wait until a failed test because those 30 days go very fast."

The family have all moved away from farming now and, despite mixed feelings, Mr Oliver is overwhelmingly relieved.

"It would have been nice to have a proper sale to say goodbye to the cows, rather than the bargain-basement affair we had. But it is a relief to have no TB testing, no single farm payment or farm assurance and none of the financial stresses."



TIM SCRIVENER

A dispersal sale is a complicated option, and should be avoided if possible.