

Management protocol controls leukosis

By: Nicole Mackinder

Brent Wilson will not let his cows die from leukosis. He just can't afford it. Owner of a 360-cow dairy, Wilson realized a long time ago that he would never be able to expand his herd from within if he lost cows to disease, so he made disease control a top priority.

"We work hard on disease control because we can't afford to purchase replacements all the time," states Wilson. "Instead we believe in maximizing comfort and minimizing disease; which keeps the cows healthy enough to stick around and become a valuable part of the herd. Cows won't live a long time if they aren't kept comfortable and healthy."

The Wilson Dairy disease control program, which includes testing and strict disease management steps, has definitely paid off. The herd is not only free of Johne's, but also has a shrinking leukosis prevalence.

Wilson first learned the herd had leukosis when a 1999 brucellosis test

revealed a positive cow and the whole herd had to be re-tested. Wilson saw the second testing as an opportunity to also have the herd tested for leukosis.

"I wanted to have the herd tested for leukosis before that but blood tests are stressful for everyone so I didn't do it," admits Wilson. "When the herd had to be re-tested for brucellosis anyway I figured why not get as much information as possible out of the samples and had the herd tested for leukosis too."

Test results revealed a 34 percent prevalence rate at the time, surprisingly lower than most herds. Nonetheless, Wilson knew 34 percent prevalence meant the probability of spreading leukosis was great unless preventative management steps were implemented.

As a result, a disease control program focusing on preventing transmission was implemented. With the transfer of white blood cells as the primary mode of leukosis transmis-

sion, Wilson was grateful he had long ago adopted a single-service needle policy at the farm.

"Single service needles are a rule at our farm," declares Wilson. "If you know you have leukosis and you know it is spread by needles, why would you use them on more than one cow and risk infecting the heifers you have worked so hard to raise?"

Even though leukosis transmission through needles is no longer a problem at the farm, the cows were still being infected by a source more difficult to control; biting flies. Flourishing in warmer weather, biting flies mimic the effect of an infected needle when they travel from one animal to the next and can wreak havoc on any disease control program.

To help battle this type of disease transmission at the Carson City farm, insecticide is applied to every animal during herd health checks. In addition to a topical fly preventative, each cow's face is sprayed with fly spray when she is in the headlocks, and fly

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spray brands are also rotated to prevent chemical resistance.

“The flies are challenging to control at any dairy farm but you still have to try,” declares Wilson. “In addition to chemical fly control we also installed numerous high velocity fans over the free stall area and that helps quite a bit to keep the flies from being able to bite the cows.”

Finally, after years of focusing on prevention, Wilson learned that convenient routine testing was finally available to add to his disease management protocol. During a regular DHI test, NorthStar Cooperative DHI technician Bill Buell informed Wilson that AntelBio had introduced a milk ELISA for leukosis.

“Once I found out the test could be run on the DHI samples already being taken, I knew I would finally be able to add testing to my disease control program,” states Wilson. “Now we would be able to easily identify leukosis positive cows and make better management decisions based on the test results.”

Identifying leukosis positive cows also enables Wilson to better monitor the dairy’s disease control program by providing a measurement of the herd’s prevalence. With a

virtual snapshot of the herd’s leukosis status, Wilson is now able to determine whether or not the management steps implemented are effective in controlling the disease.

“The greatest advantage of testing is that it enables us to identify leukosis positive animals and implement additional control measures like feeding



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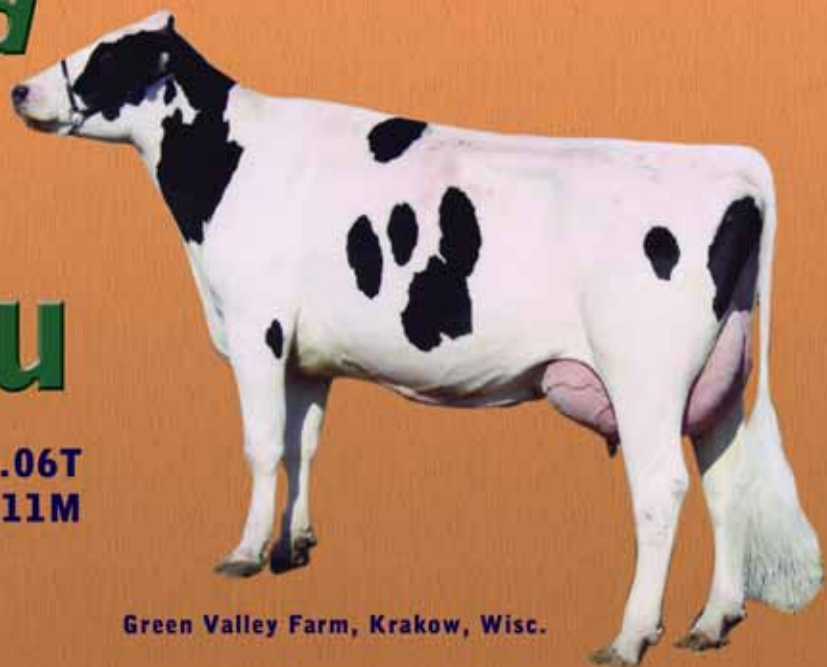
- Brent Wilson

only leukosis negative colostrum to heifer calves,” states Wilson. “Over the last year of testing we have seen our prevalence drop to 14 percent and now we are confident our disease control program is helping us keep our cows around a lot longer.” ☆

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