

Draw up a stock 'shopping list'?

Tips on how to buy in stock and avoid bringing home any nasty surprises

What are the key dos and don'ts when it comes to buying in stock, to ensure that you don't bring home more than you bargained for?

We found out why a considered – and informed – approach is the only way to avoid buying in disease.

Replacement cows and heifers are in short supply so the temptation, for many producers looking to maintain or increase herd size, is to buy whatever is available and hope for the best. But it pays to do your homework, keep a wary eye out for any possible disease problems and, above all, draw up a 'shopping list' and be choosy – even if it is a sellers' market.

At best, many producers' management of buying in stock is 'chaotic', according to leading cattle vet Peter Orpin, from the Leicestershire-based Park Vet Group. "Given the number of producers who are looking to buy in stock and the vast array of potential diseases out there, there's a lot at stake in terms of herd health. Too many producers, in my view, are buying 'blind' and are jeopardising the health of their herds."

To minimise the risk of bringing new disease problems on to your unit, he says that a good starting point is to know the health status of your own herd. "This gives you a starting point – a 'health platform' to work from and something to base your buying decisions on. And you should then compare the health status of your herd with the health status of the herd that you're considering buying stock from."

Disease threats

In the past he says that many producers have bought stock on the basis that it looks fit and healthy. "But appearances can be deceptive. Cattle carrying diseases such as IBR, BVD, Lepto, Johne's or TB can all look well – there are no obvious symptoms. So it's important to know the status of the herd in terms of these

infectious diseases. Ask about Johne's and TB, which are two of the biggest disease threats for dairy herds at the moment. When were the last TB tests carried out and what were the results? Has the producer tested for Johne's disease and is he prepared to declare in writing that he has had no clinical cases for the past three years?

"Find out if they are regularly tested and monitored for disease and ask to see a copy of the results. And ask if there is a vaccination programme in place. And if not you're not happy, walk away."

Peter says it's all about reducing risks. If your herd is relatively naïve and has little exposure to disease, then buying stock from a poor or unknown health status herd is a no no. And the reverse can be a serious problem too. "Buying stock from a herd that's too 'clean' and mixing them with a herd that's challenged with IBR and BVD, for example, can also have disastrous consequences in terms of cow health."

"It's not just about what you're bringing in in terms of disease, but what any bought-in stock will have to face when it joins your herd."

One producer who has experienced this, and other health problems, as a result of buying in stock is Newark-based producer Ian Sharman. He learnt a hard lesson when, to increase cow numbers from 240 to 300, he bought in 60 head of stock in 2006 and also bought in digital dermatitis.

"Knowing what I know now, I wish I'd done things very differently back then. Not only did the cows bring digital dermatitis to my unit, I also had a problem with one batch of 12 very naïve



Peter Orpin: "Ask sellers about their cows' Johne's disease and TB status"

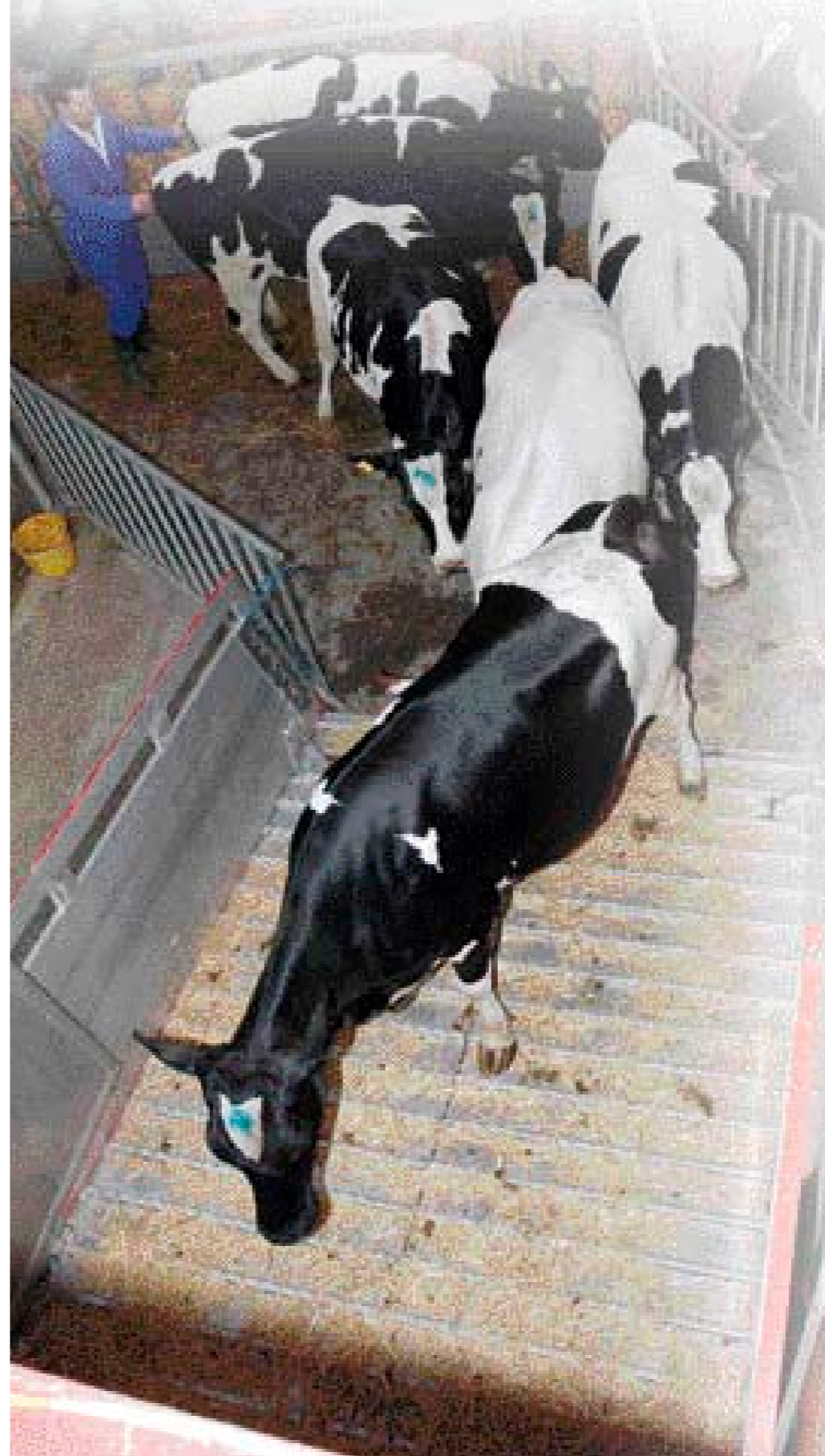
cows, which came from a 'clean' unit in Lincolnshire.

"They'd had very little, if any, exposure to the diseases that we already had here at the unit. And they picked up every little thing going – they all became ill and we even lost one cow."

Different approach

Ian has learnt from his experience and took a different approach when he recently bought another 105 cows to expand his herd size to 410 cows. "Last time I bought from three or four different units. This time I've bought an entire herd from one farm and I made sure I did my homework."

Ian Sharman: "I think I've learnt from my previous mistakes"



Make sure it's just good, healthy cattle that you're buying – not hidden diseases

He took a close look at the health status of the cows and the herd as a whole: "And I asked plenty of questions. I also compared the health status of that herd with my own, to avoid a similar problem with cows that are too 'clean'."

Ian vaccinates his herd against IBR and BVD, religiously. And the bought-in stock had also been vaccinated. "I found out that they had also been vaccinated against Lepto – not because they had a problem with it but merely as a precaution to protect farm staff."

They are also being grazed in a separate group away from the rest of the milking herd. "That's easier to do at this time of year – not so easy when the herd is housed. But it allows us a little more time to gauge just how healthy they are before we mix them with our herd."

Peter Orpin stresses that there's no point just isolating stock if you're unsure 'doing nothing'. "You have to test them and, in order to do that, you need a clear idea of what you're trying to do. Work out, with help from your vet, what the key disease risks are and sort out a biosecurity action plan to protect the herd, rather than leaving it to chance."

Ian is confident that he's avoided any nasty surprises this time. "I think I've learnt from my previous mistakes and have gone out of my way to 'manage' buying in stock this time."

"If there had been any serious health problems or large differences in terms of health status between my herd and the herd I bought then I simply wouldn't have gone there. Buying the stock would have been out of the question."

"But I felt that there were health 'parallels' between the two herds – they 'fitted' well together. Only time will tell, but I'm really not expecting any problems."

Rachael Porter