

DISEASE RISK MANAGEMENT WHEN BREEDING HEIFERS AT A HEIFER HOTEL

Objectives

Dairy farming is changing in Finland, and the average size of dairy farms is growing rapidly. One possibility to increase milk production without large investments to facilities is to reserve all animal places for dairy cows and keep the heifers at the specialized heifer farm – The Heifer Hotel, or buy the replacement heifers from outside. However, buying animals from open market is a risk for the health situation of a herd even in Finland. The project Heifer Hotel aimed at developing models for juridically and economically sound and epidemiologically safe ways to outsource the breeding of replacement heifers.

Materials and Methods

Finland is free from most severe contagious cattle diseases, such as Enzootic bovine leukosis, Brucellosis, Bovine tuberculosis and Infectious bovine rhinotracheitis; in practice also from Bovine viral diarrhoea. Salmonellosis is found on less than ten Finnish cattle farms annually; these farms are put in quarantine till the salmonellosis has been eradicated. Paratuberculosis is not known to exist on Finnish dairy farms. However, diseases such as contagious claw diseases, viral respiratory infections, parasites and even Trichophytosis may cause problems on Finnish farms buying animals from many resources.

To reduce the risk of contagious animal diseases at dairy farms, when purchasing new animals, a model of a closed epidemiological unit was developed. The unit consists of a heifer breeding farm and 1-5 dairy farms. Heifer calves are moved to the heifer hotel at the age from 2 to 20 weeks and back to dairy farms about 2 months before calving. The heifer hotel and the dairy farms sign a contract about the breeding.

Results and discussion

The farms in the unit have an equal disease situation. They are only allowed to buy animals from each other and they must follow the biosecurity measures given in the breeding contract. The farms must also join NASEVA, the centralized health care register for cattle farms, in which their health situation is documented. The salmonella insurance requires that the animals moved from the heifer hotel to the dairy farms must be screened for salmonellosis.

Conclusions

A closed epidemiological unit of a heifer hotel and dairy farms gives increased protection against contagious diseases. Contract-based breeding is also a way to ensure good condition and hereditary quality of the replacement heifers