


 A FARMER'S PERSPECTIVE OF A T.B. OUTBREAK.

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Climate Surrounding T.B. Testing.

The day of reading has arrived - there is an unnatural tension within the household. There's always the question of "What if there is a reactor?" but the actual reality of this is perhaps not addressed as fully by farmers as it should. Perhaps it is a question of not facing up to reality.

With the date of the T.B. test set in advance, time for preparation is important. Frustrations at this time can range from continual wet conditions to the inconsistencies of the blades used which would clip 5 animals or 105 animals.

Attention to close clipping and size of the square were important issues. The development of the goat comb now used for deer has revolutionized this process - not to mention the advantages of installing a crush.

Previously our farm had had a history of positive avian T.B. which could have been the result of feeding grain during summer dry periods. The comparative test as a follow up was used to give a clear herd test.

In August 1989 a portion of our herd - a range of age groups of old and young animals were T.B. tested for accreditation with the result that every animal was clear.

Twenty five days later a number of hinds were sent to the works. A telephone call from the works informing me that an animal had been detained for T.B. was a huge shock. In fact I thought that this was a mistake as this particular hind had been T.B. tested clear with the group for accreditation. She had been bought from north Auckland five years previously, had been tested regularly and was consistently clear.

My first action was to ring my local vet clinic - in reflection - for two reasons: I wanted to share the problem with someone who would also perhaps solve it and probably more importantly wanted to sort out the guy who must have misread our animal ! either at the farm or at the works.

For the veterinary fraternity the personal reaction by the farmer manifests itself in a number of ways, but there is no doubt, that the farmer does react to this news. Initially, he wants the news to be a big mistake, he probably wants to get angry with someone and as the truth hits him the despair of the implications on his farming programme and his cash flow become a reality.

For many farmers this time frame can be shortened by

understanding and a sensitivity of the farmer's predicament from the vet accompanied by a positive plan for the farmer to accept and implement.

From my point of view I believe I reacted true to form, even though I was reasonably informed of the T.B. protocol.

Even so:

1. I questioned the validity of the test  
After all this test was developed for cattle and transposed to deer.
2. Could the animals have been mixed at the works.
3. I doubted my management techniques.  
Had I been strict enough in our surveillance.

The "if onlys" were tossed around.

We were angry that we had a problem.

- i. Angry that it didn't show up in the initial test.  
- not that it would have affected the outcome.
- ii. Angry as a defence to other people's reactions, our neighbours, the responsibility to sharefarmers who were expecting a return on their investment, and people who had bought animals recently.

And then despair concerning the cash flow and banking implications.

The positive procedure to hasten me out of part of this mode - the bank despair continued - was driven by our local veterinary clinic personnel.

Firstly, LOGICAL discussion was held to establish how T.B. could be carried and not evidenced through the testing system.

1. Scrutiny and then support for our management and adopted buying-in systems helped to lessen the self doubts.
2. A procedure or plan was set up to logically determine the spread of the disease.
3. A discussion for the need to inform all those people who could be implicated through previous sales or who lived in close proximity..

Within 48 hours we had discussed and evaluated:

- i. the merits of destocking
- ii. the time frame to become re-accredited within the practicalities of management, with fawning and velvet harvesting imminent.

Action was swift:

Within 17 days a whole herd test of 1600 animals had been completed.

We had completed testing 80% of the herd before the M.A.F. officer had made an appointment to discuss the T.B. problem.

The result of this test produced 50 reactors. With no comparative test allowed I had two choices. To either kill the animals or to use Frank Griffin's blood test.

Economics persuaded me to use the blood test:

- i. \$5,000 would be spent at \$100 per animal.
- ii. The schedule for venison was \$5/kg for a heavyweight carcass.
- iii. The schedule for reactor deer was \$2/kg.

With 3 positives diagnosed by the blood test out of the 50 reactors these animals were sent to the works.

#### ISSUES WHICH LEFT ME AS A FARMER SCEPTICAL.

The vet, my wife and I followed the three blood tested positive deer to the D.S.P. to see at first hand how accurate the blood test would be ( in retrospect this visit to the D.S .P. is an important step and helps accept this disease is in the herd) .

Frank Griffin had ranked the animals in order as to those showing the most visual lessions.

Sure enough the ranking was accurate.

One didn't show lesions, but we were comfortable that the disease was in the early stages of manisfestion.

Had we not been present we would not have seen an ERROR made with the samples.

The samples were placed in non identified plastic containers on the window sill and when they came to relate these samples to the particular identification on the animal in the confusion they were switched.

This rekindled our earlier thoughts that the infected animal may not have been ours.

This is serious - What generated our livelihood was being seriously hampered by this T.B. outbreak. We sold weaners for breeding herds and stags for mating - we could only now sell to the works and here was "someone" mixing up the samples. "Someone", whose decision or action would determine the future of my farming survival.

This was not the end of our frustrations -

- i. Samples sent off for culture were "lost".
- ii. A culture was claimed as live T.B. - on the vet's insistence that a second test be carried out proved that this was avian T.B.
- iii. A second herd test carried out pre-Christmas realised 21 reactors - due to public holidays the blood test was delayed until mid January. This delay was frustrating as we were keen to know if the disease was arrested.

We, the farmers are the people who bear the brunt of an outbreak of T.B. We pay the costs of testing, bear the financial implications for the loss of trading, and fair enough this is our chosen profession.

However a professional attitude and accountability from the servicing sector who we MUST employ is absolutely vital.

#### SOME SUGGESTIONS TO ASSIST THE SERVICING SECTOR.

Discuss with the farmer before his test the implications if a T.B. reactor is discovered.

Several veterinarians have commented that they don't like finding reactors because they know the farmers and have a reasonable idea of their financial positions.

More work should be publicised on the cost to a farmer if he has a T.B. outbreak. This could include the actual cost of testing, blood testing, loss of revenue if his farming policy doesn't have a venison or velvetting operation to provide income and implications to his cash flow.

In summary alerting a farmer via seminars, flyers, or local deer farming meetings of the downside of T.B. and the costs involved of whole herd testing before the farmer can be returned to full accreditation is important.

#### ONCE THE DISEASE IS DISCOVERED.

- i. Move quickly to establish the facts with the farmer and plan how to best return to full accreditation.
- ii. There is no need for the farmer to over react by destroying reactors immediately - after all the disease has been in the herd for a period of time.
- iii. Isolate the animals and work through the options - then act.
- iv. Be available to respond to neighbours who need more

comforting than the farmer can give.

Some farmers through their own actions will have discredited themselves in the eyes of their farming colleagues.

The vet should be available to respond to neighbours who may need an independent opinion on the situation.

- v. In some instances I suggest the costs of his T.B. testing could be spread over a number of years.

You people are a vital link in the part of reducing and removing T.B. - good relationships constructively founded with your clients are essential.

#### MANAGEMENT.

In our case the vet and I identified what we thought were "hot" mobs.

The two year old animals were giving us the majority of reactions so these were isolated. We made sure that they were run seperately and on one part of the farm. Interestingly enough, this "hot" mob could be related back to the year the original T.B. animal reared a fawn - the fawn year group when she was dry one year had no reactors.

The Eliza test was used inbetween the standard skin test on this mob indicating that the disease was not spreading rapidly.

Also, of comfort, was the identification of the T.B. strain which was a "non virulent" type.

Our farming policy at this stage was to develop the farm from income and increase our herd numbers from breeding. We had established a reputation for good stock which were keenly sought after.

We had sold the weaner hinds about 6 weeks before our discovery of an infected hind and the majority of our weaner stag sales were pending.

Only culls were sent for venison.

All buyers were contacted as soon as we knew we had a problem. Animals were scattered from the Waikato to the Wairarapa, Taranaki and through Hawkes Bay. Thankfully no one reported back from subsequent testing that they had the disease. Their response was positive and were pleased they had been kept informed.

Our neighbours were informed by letter and through discussion

with our vet and as a consequence tested their cattle as a precaution. None of the neighbours directly consulted or communicated with us.

Our sharefarmers, who at this stage owned 45% of the herd, were very supportive and philosophical. The sharefarmers' involvement compounded the cash flow problem for us. It meant that if we were to retain and increase our ownership share we would have to buy their stock as they could no longer sell them off farm.

#### THE EFFECT T.B. HAS ON THE FARMER'S BUSINESS.

Implications to our cash flow were interesting in that we had only sold part of our annual weaner draft, no sire stags sales would be held.

Not only would we have a loss of income but we would now have to carry extra numbers of stock through to killable ages. The hinds were close to fawning so killing them was not an option. Their fawns would not be saleable inside this current financial year.

The "sale" stags could be kept for velvet or venison. We decided to increase these numbers but with a heavier culling regime to provide some cash. To maintain the sharefarmer's deer at a static level we had to purchase their surplus animals. We were still running 1.000 ewes - it became very evident that this operation would have to cease to make way for the expansion necessary and to provide some capital. Budgeting with a plan was discussed with the bank and their support was forthcoming.

On top of this we faced the costs of two whole herd tests and necessary blood tests within the financial year. This cost alone was in the order of \$14,500.

#### IN SUMMARY:

As a result of this outbreak my focus on T.B. is more defined. No animals enter the property without stringent back ground research. T.B. testing is not the traumatic task it was knowing that with a great deal of help I have been able to weather a T.B. outbreak. T.B. is a very emotive topic and for this reason the whole issue has to be dealt with sensitively and professionally.

For this reason we are grateful to our local vets for their pragmatic approach to the problem and for their full support.