Welcome to the Feb 2026 issue of **Topvets**

Moosletter

Selective Dry Cow—The New Norm

Selective Dry Cow for your herd is now the default – Blanket Dry Cow (whole herd dry cow) will be the exception. The rules we operate under have changed and it is now going to be much harder to authorise the use of antibiotic dry cow therapy (ABDCT) to a whole herd. We now must prescribe for each cow, not for a herd.

There is justifiable concern that the widespread use of antibiotics will lead to the selection of antibiotic resistance (this has been found overseas and some weak evidence of it in NZ). Perhaps a more tangible reason why we need to shift from blanket use of antibiotic dry cow therapy is that we have Free Trade Agreement with the EU that is based on "equivalence" – the use of antibiotics to prevent mastitis over the dry period is not permitted in many parts of the EU.

Many of you have already transitioned to using teat-sealants alone for uninfected cows and only using ABDCT for cows likely to be infected so this really won't affect you. For those of you who are thinking that you may still be able to use ABDCT on the whole herd, unless your BMSCC is averaging over 200,000 and rising from February, we will probably not be able to authorise blanket treatment. We need good records to make the best decisions for each individual cow, this means we need to know a cow's mastitis history, (please enter all mastitis events into MINDA), her herd test history, age and predicted production level at drying off. Nationally we know that 77.1% of cows in the national herd got herd tested in the 2023/24 season. What we are expected do for the herds that are not herd testing has not been fully addressed, but the advice suggests using RMT to define a cow as infected or uninfected. If your herd is in a position where blanket ABDCT might be justifiable perhaps yours is a herd that would really benefit most from herd testing. We will help you identify cows that will be suitable for not receiving an antibiotic at drying off and get a teat sealant alone. Between now and drying off start thinking about the logistics of drying off some cows without antibiotics.

Happy New Year, and welcome to the first 2026 edition of our Moosletter. Hopefully you all managed to get a well deserved break over the holiday season. This summer has been relatively kind to us in the Far North, with regular doses of rain and plenty of warm weather keeping the grass growing. Long may it continue!

In this issue

Tetanus in horses

Horses are very susceptible to tetanus and should be vaccinated for it. It is a severe disease and is difficult to treat, often resulting in death. It is easy to prevent. We often have horses that have been wounded and thus are in risk of developing tetanus but have never been vaccinated. In a case like this, a single dose of tetanus vaccine will not prevent tetanus. For immediate short term protection tetanus antitoxin is required.

If you would like to get your horse vaccinated, we recommend the following programme: a foal should get its first vaccination at 6 months followed by a booster a month later. Unvaccinated horses of any age would likewise need 2 initial vaccinations 4 weeks apart. Then a 3rd dose a year later will give a long lasting immunity. It is advisable to give a booster after 5 years especially to valuable animals. If a horse experiences a risk event such as a wound or a hoof abscess or prepartum [before foaling] , a booster should be given if it is more than 12 months since the last vaccination.

Facial Eczema Spore Counting

This summers weather pattern has set up a scenario of lots of pasture cover, plenty of dead matter and ideal conditions for facial eczema outbreaks.

If you are interested in knowing how high the risk is on your farm and ongoing monitoring, contact the clinic and we can start testing pasture samples that you have collected.

Gribbles update the regional spore count trends weekly on their website. You can monitor this on https://labportal.gribbles.co.nz/#/public/facial-eczema

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Meatworks Vet Certificatation

As mating is finishing up and scanning is underway, now is the time where many bulls and cull cows are up for the chopping block. In some cases, these animals need vet certification to be legally fit for transport. Sending pictures and videos of the animal to your vet if you're unsure whether it needs a cert can be very helpful. The animal also needs an area it can be adequately examined and restrained for video recording. A hard surface will help assess lameness and will mimic how they will look at the works. The animal will also need to be able to be clearly identified, spray paint goes a long way. It's important to book in a vet as soon as you can after securing a spot on the truck as it can take a day or two for a certification to be approved by the meat works vets when it's not clear-cut case. Vet certs can be valid for up to 7 days. The truckies also appreciate knowing there will be a cert on board ahead of time as it can change their run with specific vet cert conditions. These conditions can include;

- Direct to slaughter premises
- Last on the truck and first off
- Reduced stocking density
- Lower deck only

It's important to remember that a cert for transport does not guarantee fitness for consumption, that call is made at the works. If the animal is unfit for transport, other options include;

- Vet treatment (e.g. dehorning ingrown horns, removal of cancer eyes and masses) or euthanasia
- Pet food or home kill

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Ryegrass Staggers (RGS)

Ryegrass staggers is one of the most commonly encountered neurological conditions in grazing livestock in New Zealand. It is important not to confuse this with **grass staggers**, which is caused by magnesium deficiency and requires very different management.

Ryegrass staggers is caused by toxins (primarily **lolitrem B**) produced by an **endophyte fungus** that lives within perennial ryegrass plants. This fungus has a *symbiotic relationship* with the grass:

- the fungus gains nutrients from the plant
- the grass benefits from improved growth and protection against insects

Unfortunately, these toxins can have significant effects on grazing animals.

Toxin levels are highest in the **basal leaf sheath** and **seed heads**, meaning the risk of disease can extend from **spring through to autumn**, particularly during warm, dry conditions when pastures are stressed or seeding heavily.

Clinical Signs

Ryegrass staggers can affect **all ages and classes of stock**, and it is common to see multiple age groups affected at the same time. Signs usually appear **7–14 days** after animals are introduced to affected pasture.

Clinical signs vary widely:

- fine head tremors
- muscle twitching
- exaggerated or jerky limb movements
- swaying and staggering when walking
- difficulty rising
- collapse in severe cases

Signs are often **exacerbated by stress or handling**, and affected animals can be very difficult to move safely. While deaths are uncommon, they may occur due to **accidental trauma**, such as falling into drains, streams, or off steep ground.

There is **no specific diagnostic test** for ryegrass staggers, and diagnosis is usually based on clinical signs and pasture conditions.

Treatment and Management

There is **no specific antidote** for ryegrass staggers. Most animals will recover within **1–2 weeks** if:

- removed from affected pasture, and
- provided with alternative feed (silage, hay, baleage, brassicas)

The biggest challenge is **safely managing and moving affected animals** to prevent injury.

Some animals appear to improve after **subcutaneous magnesium injections**, although oral magnesium does not seem to have a consistent effect. There is also anecdotal evidence that nutritional supplements containing seaweed (such as *Nutrimol*) may help, but there is currently **no strong clinical trial evidence** to confirm this.

Preventing Ryegrass Staggers

Prevention can be challenging. While **endophyte-free** and so-called **"safe" endophyte** ryegrass cultivars exist, they often lack persistence under NZ conditions. Endophyte-free pastures commonly become re-infected within **2–3 years**, and even "safe" endophyte pastures may become unsafe within **3–4 years**.
Risk can be reduced by:

- avoiding grazing the **base of the plant and seed heads**
- maintaining **leafy pasture** where possible
- preventing excessive build-up of **dead litter**
- encouraging **clover content** in the sward
- avoiding summer set-stocking that promotes ryegrass dominance

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