

Spring clean

It's time to treat your girls to a

Put a spring in your herd's step for the summer. Set aside some time to devise a hoof health plan to tackle digital dermatitis once and for all. A bit of 'pampering' now should pay dividends during next winter.

This is the time of year when a herd's digital dermatitis problem is usually at its peak. The disease has had a long, wet winter to do its worst – and it usually has – to your herds' health and welfare, and your business.

And now, as thoughts switch to turn out, is a good time to resolve to get on and make sure you tackle it head on during the spring and summer, according to Bristol Vet School's hoof specialist Nick Bell.

He says that the most recent research estimated that around 80% of UK herds had digital dermatitis, but he believes that in reality the figure is probably higher. "And each case costs producers around £80. This figure includes additional labour and treatment. Other hidden losses, arising from reduced milk yield and poor fertility, are more difficult to quantify.

"A cow with digital dermatitis can add an extra 20 days to her calving-to-first-service interval and other work has shown a 1.7% loss in milk yield," he says.

So, there are plenty of production and financial reasons to now turn your attention to feet, ready for turnout in a couple of months. "Feet are cleaner and drier when cows are outside and this makes the disease much easier to treat – the burden of infection is reduced," explains Dr Bell.

"And once you're on top of the disease you can then stop fire fighting and be proactive and devise and adhere to a winter-foot-care regime that should keep digital dermatitis at bay," he says, adding that the 'regime' should comprise regular foot bathing and keeping the feet as dry and slurry free as possible.

No pain

Formalin is still the foot bath solution of choice for many producers, despite the health and safety implications – it's a known carcinogen. Copper sulphate is popular too and there are also other products available.

One of these products, which is in use in more than 60 countries, is Hoof-fit Bath Liquid. It contains chelated zinc, aloe vera, organic acids, and alcohol. And the distributor, Quill Productions, claims that the disinfectant properties are as powerful, and far safer, than any comparable chemical such as formalin.

"Just as important as efficacy it that cows won't feel any pain from the foot bath solution when they walk through it – it's



those feet

well-earned pedicure – or three



Above: Tender hoof: digital dermatitis infection

Above right: Nick Bell: "Each case costs at least £80 to treat"

Left: A proactive paddle: regular foot bathing should help to keep digital dermatitis under control

gentle on the hoof," says the company's Ben Burgess. "You can handle the liquid at 100% concentration and feel no pain." Work carried out at Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture and Rural Development estimated that the pain that a cow with digital dermatitis suffers after she walks through a 5% solution formalin bath can impact on her milk yield for up to 30 days.

"In addition to being gentle and killing bacteria on the hoof, the combination of zinc and aloe vera encourages fast and strong skin healing of skin.

"The healing properties of the chelated minerals and aloe vera are unique compared with any other foot-bathing chemical, and have a massive impact on preventing re-infection of wounds," says Mr Burgess.

This is one key reason why the Hoof-fit Bath Liquid is only used on a seven-to-ten day cycle during 'normal' conditions, as opposed to every day when using formalin.

The liquid is recommended for use at between 2% and 3% solution. "When 4.5 litres are diluted with 180 litres of water, up to 500 cows can be treated. During an increased occurrence of foot infection, treatment should be increased to three or four consecutive days," adds Mr Burgess.

Cow 'pedicure'

Somerset-based foot trimmer, and vice chairman of the National Association of Cattle Hoof Trimmers (NACFT), Steve Simmons is a fan of this foot bathing liquid.

"The solution has a nice, creamy base – it conditions the feet. Not only do they look good and are disease free, but the cow gets a bit of a pedicure," he says.

As with any footbath though, he stresses that it will only