Milk quality assurance programme for paratuberculosis results in increasing proportion of test-negative dairy herds

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In 2006, a milk quality assurance program (MQAP) for paratuberculosis in Dutch dairy herds was initiated. The aim of the MQAP is to reduce the concentration of Mycobacterium avium subsp. paratuberculosis in milk delivered to the milk factories. Herds participating in the MQAP are assigned a herd status based on the results of herd examinations by individual milk-ELISA. Farmers are entitled to confirm positive ELISA results by faecal culture. Test-negative herds are assigned status ‘A’. Test-positive herds are assigned status ‘B’ (if all test-positive cattle have been removed from the herd) or status ‘C’ (if any test-positive cattle are retained in the herd). The MQAP promotes preventive management measures and culling of test-positive cattle to reduce the spread of Map. On the herd-level, these measures increase the probability to obtain and maintain status A. On the national level, these measures taken by individual farmers increase the milk quality of the national dairy herd. The aim of this paper is to present results obtained over a six-year period (2006-2011) in the first cohort of 711 herds that voluntarily entered the MQAP in 2006-2007 without prior participation in a paratuberculosis programme. To date, 30% of the 711 herds have consistently had status A, 15% of the herds have consistently had status B or C, and 54% of the herds had transitions between status A and status B or C. At all, the proportion of status A herds increased from 45% upon the initial assessment to 75% at five years after the initial assessment. It is concluded that the programme results in an increase of the proportion of status A (test-negative) herds over time. Based on the results achieved in the programme, the Dutch dairy processing industries are requiring all dairy herds delivering milk to their factories to have at least status ‘B’ since January 2011.