



## HEALTHIER HERD HEALTHIER PROFITS

An educational initiative brought to you by MSD Animal Health working with the UK's farm vets

# Part One: Benefits of herd health planning

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# How diagnostics can help boost your herd's health

**B**VD, leptospirosis and IBR are among the main causes of poor production and reduced profitability on many UK cattle farms. Over the coming months, this new series will be providing practical advice and farmer based experience on how to tackle these diseases in beef herds. Advice for dairy farms can be found online at [www.farmersguardian.com/healthierherd](http://www.farmersguardian.com/healthierherd).

Leptospirosis and BVD are thought to be present on nearly two-thirds of beef farms, with IBR affecting a quarter. Left unaddressed, all three infectious diseases can cause significant losses through reduced fertility,

depressed growth rates and higher levels of other production hitting diseases (see panel).

BVD alone has been shown to cost £37 per cow per year in infected beef herds, while IBR can add four weeks onto the time needed for beef cattle to reach slaughter weight. Reduced conception rates thanks to leptospirosis can also hit the bottom line hard through reduced numbers of calves born.

The huge impact these diseases can have on beef health and profitability is the reason behind the Healthier Herd, Healthier Profits initiative.

The complexity of each disease means a thorough and farm specific strategy to identify and address any problem is crucial.

As such, having an active herd health plan and working closely with a vet is essential.

### Advice

Vet Neil Laing, of The Clyde Vet Group in Lanark, believes the fact all three diseases are so difficult to control means drawing on vet advice is hugely valuable.

"These diseases are probably responsible for the majority of poor production on beef units," he says. "They are not simple to control and as such it's vital to discuss strategy with your vet. There's no one size fits all as herd control will vary depending on different farm circumstances."

Only by regularly discussing and reviewing disease status by using diagnostic tests will it be possible to construct an effective strategy. Depending on individual farm situations, this may involve choosing to eradicate or manage disease. In most situations, vaccination should form part of the control strategy.



Leptospirosis and BVD are thought to be present on two-thirds of beef farms, with IBR affecting a quarter.

Because all three diseases can severely impact fertility, all beef breeding units should look to tackle them head on. Vet Keith Cutler, from The Endell Vet Group in Wiltshire, believes getting on top of endemic disease will help beef suckler units achieve a compact calving period, which is essential for achieving maximum profitability.

"Those farms which don't address disease tend to get cows calving later and later due to reduced fertility," he says.

### Performance

Farmers who improve cow health and get more cows calving at the

start of the calving period, will tend to see improved performance. Those calves born earlier will generally grow better and be healthier, while cows have a longer recovery time before breeding which will help fertility.

Farm neighbours and bought-in stock pose the biggest risk for disease being introduced to any beef unit. As a result, ideally, farm boundaries should be double fenced and control strategies should involve working in partnership with neighbours.

When buying stock, the key is asking the right question about the herd you are buying from or

the individual animal. Mr Cutler urges producers to test and quarantine bought-in cattle, regardless of whether the main herd is vaccinated.

On beef finisher units, Mr Laing believes IBR poses the biggest risk to performance and profitability, making vaccination a must.

"Vaccinating bought-in store cattle for IBR on arrival is a no brainer. If you don't do it, it will hit growth rates and the effects can be dramatic in terms of death and loss of production," he says.

Mr Laing says knowing the BVD status of bought-in stores is also hugely valuable.

Mr Cutler recommends doing a pooled blood test on bought-in stores to assess if there is a persistently infected (PI) animal (see panel). If the test is positive, individual tests should be carried out to find and remove the PI.

"Often as soon as you adopt this strategy you will see less pneumonia and better growth rates," he says.

This is just one example of the huge value herd diagnostics can have in assessing herd status and designing a farm specific control strategy as part of a herd health plan. Talk to your vet about the most cost effective and relevant testing strategy for your farm.

### Key infectious diseases at a glance

#### BOVINE VIRAL DIARRHOEA (BVD)

- The BVD virus is spread via nasal secretions and faeces
- Infection can also move vertically from cow to calf during pregnancy causing the calf to be 'persistently infected' (PI), meaning it will shed virus for its whole life
- PIs are the main cause of disease spread. Bought-in stock are a major risk
- Effects: mucosal disease, reduced fertility, abortion and immune-suppression. Infected herds are likely to be more susceptible to pneumonia and other infectious disease
- Good biosecurity is key to preventing spread. Vaccination will help protect stock

#### INFECTIOUS BOVINE RHINOTRACHEITIS (IBR)

- IBR is caused by the herpes virus and is spread via nasal secretions
- Once infected cows become

#### latent carriers for life

- Effects: runny noses, pneumonia, loss of appetite, high temperature, milk drop
- Good biosecurity is key to preventing spread. Vaccination can help reduce shedding and protect naive animals

#### LEPTOSPIROSIS

- Bacterial infection spread in urine, placental material or aborted fetuses
- Can be transmitted by sheep and through contaminated water and semen
- There are two different strains which can affect UK herds
- Effects: milk drop, weak calves, abortion, infertility, loss of appetite
- Can be spread to humans, resulting in flu like symptoms and even death
- Good biosecurity is key to prevent spread. Talk to your vet about the right vaccine for your herd to ensure coverage of both strains



Only by regularly discussing and reviewing disease status by using diagnostic tests will it be possible to construct an effective strategy for your herd tailored to its individual needs.

**NEXT MONTH:**  
Find out more about leptospirosis.

This information was provided by MSD Animal Health, makers of Bovilis® BVD, Bovilis® IBR Marker Live, Bovilis® IBR Marker Inac and Leptavoid™. Always use medicines responsibly.

Further information is available from MSD Animal Health, Walton Manor, Walton, Milton Keynes MK7 7AJ.  
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