

Disease control

UK must clean up 'dirty man' image

TB may dominate the headlines when it comes to cattle diseases, but experts say more focus needs to be placed on controlling endemic diseases such as BVD and Johnhe's or the UK will be left behind. **Sarah Alderton** reports

Dairy and beef farmers must take firmer control of cattle disease if they are to remain competitive and secure future markets, experts are warning.

They say TB in England is holding back the control of endemic diseases such as bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD), Johnhe's and infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), which cost the cattle industry millions. BVD alone is thought to lose farmers £40-61m/year.

While some progress in England has been made in the past four to five years to control endemic diseases via RDP-funded regional schemes such as the South West Healthy Livestock Initiative, there is no one co-ordinated approach.

Tim Brigstocke, executive director of the Cattle Health Certification Standards (ChECS) – the body set up in 1999 to regulate UK cattle health schemes – says the industry must come together to work on reducing endemic infection in UK herds if they want to be competitive and project a positive image.

"Other countries have simply overtaken us and this will soon start to affect our markets. The UK

HOW CHECS WORKS

* ChECS is the self-regulatory body for cattle health schemes in the UK and Ireland. There are nine ChECS-approved cattle health schemes providing programmes for the monitoring, control and ultimate eradication of disease.

The schemes also provide certification when a herd meets the agreed national ChECS cattle health standards.

Herd owners may test for any or all of the diseases at the same time. At its most basic level, entry to a cattle health scheme requires only routine monitoring (which in dairy herds is by regular bulk

milk testing). This will give a good assessment of the health status of the herd. Once the health status is known, a herd may progress through a programme of control and eradication to eventual disease-free accreditation.

- Approved schemes include:
- * Advanced Cattle Health Scheme
 - * AFBI Cattle Health Scheme
 - * APHA Herdsure Cattle Health Improvement Service
 - * HI Herd Health Care
 - * Jersey Island Genetics
 - * Irish Limousin Cattle Society
 - * Herd Wise National Milk Laboratories
 - * Premium Cattle Health Scheme
 - * Shetland Animal Health Scheme.

is seen as the dirty man of disease control, both within Europe and globally. Disease-free countries only want to import from other disease-free countries; the UK simply cannot claim to be that," he says.

Mr Brigstocke says before UK farmers can get anywhere near to eradicating diseases such as BVD and Johnhe's, they need to be monitoring their animals. With the English government unlikely to fund

any eradication plan, it is up to farmers to take control. "We need a national scheme that is tweaked for the regions, but has central coordination," he says.

Cattle health schemes provide the framework for the monitoring, control and ultimate eradication of disease. However, with only 15,000 farms ChECS-accredited, more farmers should be looking at them to get on top of disease," he says.



ANGELA HAMPFORD/PUREX

"There is a commercial demand to put health status information in the catalogues. There is a definite premium for these animals. More beef cattle in the Skipton area are being monitored and the suckler man is taking note over his own suckler herd."

FARMER VIEW

John Torrance
Romford, Essex

Dairy farmer John Torrance milks 450 cows and his herd has been free of BVD and IBR for 10 years. He regularly monitors cattle health through a ChECS-approved herd health scheme.

He says he used to suffer with BVD on his farm and found when calves were exposed to BVD they got secondary infections such as pneumonia.

"The cost of pneumonia was crippling. It affected growth rates, heifers were calving down later and there were the vet and medication costs. That's why we decided to go down the route of eradication."

Mr Torrance joined a health scheme and began blood testing every animal – cows and youngstock – every year for three years. He admits it wasn't cheap at the time, but was well worth the investment. Now, to keep his accreditation for BVD and IBR, he blood tests a random sample of 10 youngstock every spring.

"We saw benefits pretty quick and that's why we stuck with it. Antibiotics use in youngstock has gone way down and we haven't had to treat any for pneumonia for more than six years. It also gives you peace of mind."

Mr Torrance blood tested animals and culled out cattle found to be persistently infected with BVD. He says he didn't have to cull many when he began testing. He now runs a completely closed herd – the last time he bought an animal in was 2005.

Mr Torrance's next project is Johnhe's eradication after a recent test confirmed the same low reading his herd received five years ago.

Running a high-health status herd has opened up new markets for Mr Torrance, as he is able to sell bulls into AI studs.

Mr Torrance adds: "Attention to detail at times like this is important, you don't need things to keep pulling you back."

VET VIEW

Keith Cutler
Endell Vet Group, Wiltshire

At the most basic level every farmer should know the health status of their herd, says large animal vet Keith Cutler.

"Initial testing isn't expensive, and then steps need to be taken to improve. ChECS schemes have often been seen as elitist, but they provide a framework of what to do and when. More and more commercial herds are joining ChECS schemes because farmers appreciate the fact that healthy cows are more profitable."

Mr Cutler believes with a more concerted approach to, for example, BVD control, the disease could be under control in two years.

"If we can get on top of BVD then we will see fertility improve, cell counts come down and fewer cases of pneumonia."

PEDIGREE BREED SOCIETY VIEW

Frank Milnes
Beef Shorthorn Society

Frank Milnes says that, since 2013, the Beef Shorthorn Society has only accepted sale animals that are members of a ChECS-approved health scheme and from a herd that has tested for BVD and Johnhe's for at least 12 months. Animals not from accredited herds must test for the BVD virus and antibody and IBR antibody.

"We did this to raise awareness among all beef producers about the health status of the herd and to minimise the risk of buying in infection," he says. "We are already seeing other breed societies following suit and the more that do this, the better," he adds.

"Any initiative that can improve the health of an animal is a positive. It is more cost effective to monitor herd health than tackle an outbreak."

AUCTIONEER VIEW

Glyn Lucas
H&H and CCM Auctions

Pedigree auctioneer Glyn Lucas says an increasing number of people look to buy high-health animals, which is why H&H now runs dedicated sales.

The last high-health pedigree dairy sale at Borderway Mart was held in December. Mr Lucas estimates these animals made a premium of approximately 20-30% over those not in a scheme. H&H is also starting to print the BVD and IBR status of herds in its catalogues.

He says: "I want to see it becoming more routine to promote herd health schemes. It makes a lot of commercial sense."

But it's not just the elite pedigree breeders who want information on cattle health. Ted Ogden at CCM Auctions, Skipton, says more of his commercial store cattle customers are asking for it, too.

DISEASE FACTS

90%

of UK herds are thought to have been exposed to BVD virus

35%

About 35% of herds were infected with Johnhe's in 2006

£106

The cost a cow of leptospirosis

75%

of cattle exposed to leptospirosis

£45,000

is the estimated cost of BVD in a 100-cow herd over 10 years; Johnhe's can cost more than £20,000

£25-61m

is the annual cost of BVD to the cattle sector; the effect of Johnhe's is about £13m/year

Source: ChECS



Farmers must take control, says Tim Brigstocke.