

ASK THE VET...

We put producers' health and welfare questions to a leading pig vet for some timely – and helpful – advice. Here, in the first of our new column, **Duncan Berkshire** (MA VetMB MSc CertPM MRCVS), from the North Yorkshire-based XL Vets Bishopton Veterinary Group, examines a problem that's been seen on many UK units during the past few months

QUESTION:

We have been experiencing a higher than usual number of returns during the past month, particularly in the four-to-five-week post-service period, in our 750-sow unit. We have also seen reduced sow feed intakes in the farrowing houses for a few days, and the piglet weaning weights have also fallen. The finishing herd on site coughed and sneezed for a few weeks before we saw anything in the sows. We vaccinate sows against PRRS virus and have heard talk of 'flu in the area. So, what are the likely causes of our problems and do you have any suggestions on what we can do to reduce the issues we are seeing?

ANSWER:

The clinical signs that you describe on your unit fit with an infectious viral disease that has probably affected both your finishing herd and your sows. Of the diseases that are present in the UK, the main possibilities are PRRS virus or influenza virus.

Both viruses can affect any age of pig and exhibit respiratory signs of sneezing, coughing, snotty snouts and conjunctivitis, often seen as tear staining from the inside corner of the eye. They also cause an enormous amount of immunosuppression, which means that the pigs' immune systems do not work as well at defending the body against other infections. This leads to, apart from the clinical signs that can cause so many problems from the primary viral infection, secondary bacterial infections raising their heads and causing further issues for your pigs.

I assume that you are a PRRS-positive herd and are using a live PRRS vaccine on your sows, which will provide good protection to help stabilise the health of the sows. PRRS virus itself is able to mutate and is altering all the time and, although there are herds within the UK that have had problems with PRRS control when



using vaccination and management, the likelihood of suddenly having a flare-up of a 'new variety' of PRRS on your farm is very low. If there is any potential for this, your vet will be able to advise on sampling in order that any PRRS virus on site can be isolated and sequenced to gain better information on your farm strain.

It is more likely that you have influenza (flu) virus running through your animals on farm. Finishing herd animals and adult pigs can all be infected by the virus and demonstrate respiratory signs as above. Grower and finisher pigs will also be predisposed to go down with any opportunistic bacterial infections present on farm due to the effect on their immune systems, examples of which would be Glasser's disease (*Haemophilus parasuis*), APP (*Actinobacillus pleuropneumoniae*), and Streptococcal disease (*Streptococcus suis*).

Part of the battle to return the herd to normal production will be

to control anything that flares on the back of the flu virus.

Breeding herd effects are often seen as a result of the extremely high temperatures (pyrexia) that these animals can have following infection with the virus, most notably having an effect on reproductive parameters. Pyrexia in-pig sows will often lose their pregnancies, and will return to service at random times, giving increased numbers of animals coming through as irregular returns. Sows coming up to full term and farrowing time can end up giving birth early, usually resulting in smaller birth weight and much lower viability piglets that can have difficulty getting going during these very important first few hours of life.

Lactating animals in the farrowing houses that are infected will also run high temperatures, and this will have knock on effects to their litters present. Adults will reduce their feed intakes as they

fight the virus, meaning that their overall energy balance is affected.

This will have a knock-on effect on milk production and lead to piglets struggling to get enough milk to grow. Piglet mortality can be affected, but usually the biggest influence is on the size of piglets at weaning – they are smaller at weaning and less robust in the post weaning stage.

Tests for influenza can be carried out in order to isolate virus, or the antibody production in the blood can be assessed once there has been time for the animals to respond. Your vet will be able to advise on what would be most applicable to your farm. There are many different strains of 'flu virus that can infect pigs and some of these can also infect other species, including humans. The most prevalent strains in circulation within the UK pig herds at the moment are the human H1N1 pandemic strain, and a variant on an H1N2 strain. Both of these are

giving prolonged clinical signs in the field, distinct from the rather explosive classical flu infections that used to rip through a farm and disappear.

If you have either of these strains as your infection, be prepared for a potentially longer course of disease than you have perhaps seen before.

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Treatment for the animals can depend on the strain that is present, although all infected animals will benefit from symptomatic treatment to reduce their temperatures and get them to return to normal production.



Duncan Berkshire

Dependent on the background endemic infections on farm, preventative treatments to control these may be warranted, and your vet will be able to help you here.

Longer-term control will aim to stabilise the health of the herd, meaning we want good immunity to be present within the majority of the animals.

There is a vaccine licensed within the UK that covers some of the strains of flu that are in circulation and this may be appropriate to use if your vet advises you in light of the diagnostics and the clinical picture on your unit.

Otherwise, pig flow and management may be the most beneficial changes that you can make to calm the clinical signs down and stabilise the herd's immunity, coupled with symptomatic treatment if required.

Currently you are not alone in seeing viral disease on your farm leading to respiratory and repro-

ductive effects, with a significant increase in numbers of cases seen this past winter.

It is important to get advice on what is causing your problems from your vet in order that you can establish a proactive approach to controlling the disease process and returning your herd to full production as quickly as possible.

Ask the vet...

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