

Ed Tims is now keeping a much tighter handle on potentially damaging disease threats.



## Proactive health management underpins calf unit sustainability

**Ear tag tissue testing to guard against the introduction of Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD) is now an essential part of biosecurity at the specialist calf rearing and beef finishing unit at Stuchbury Hall, Sulgrave, Oxfordshire.**

The testing regime, which minimises the risk of introducing persistently infected (PI) calves – or BVD carriers – has been adopted as part of a three-pronged uplift in health management that has turned around the fortunes of the unit.

"Four years ago we were suffering up to 10% mortality rates, ultimately due to pneumonia," recalls Ed Tims, who is the fifth generation of his family farming at 550 acre Stuchbury Hall, where he works alongside his parents, Michael and Joan, and his wife Kate.

"These losses, alongside the poor performance of affected calves that survived and the associated vet and medicine costs, were making the business unsustainable. We needed to sort the problem or get out – it was as simple as that."

The family enlisted the help of experts, starting with their calf supplier Meadow Quality and vet consultants Lambert,

Leonard and May (LLM), who provide specialist support to Meadow Quality and farms that they supply. As James Alcock of LLM explains, Stuchbury Hall became one of the first specialist calf units to adopt a routine health plan, and this began with a detailed investigation as to the causes of the problems.

"The overall pattern and extent of pneumonia on the unit pointed to underlying immune-suppression in the calves that was consistent with BVD infection," reports Mr Alcock. "Furthermore, we were able to identify from post mortems and lung washes the main organisms causing the pneumonia, with the organism *Histophilus somni* heavily implicated.

"Knowing one of the primary causative organisms enabled us to recommend a more effective treatment regime, switching to an antibiotic with longer duration of action against *Histophilus somni*."

While more effective treatment has been important, significant benefits of a structured health management approach have also resulted from disease prevention rather than cure.

At Stuchbury Hall, calves of two to four weeks of age arrive in batches of 24 every six weeks, with all cattle taken through to finish at about 22 months. Hence, there are potential risks from new cattle being introduced on a regular basis, as well as from the close contact of varying age groups of cattle.

"It is important to be aware of the risks, and in this situation – with batches of calves coming in from varying sources – BVD is potentially a significant factor," adds Mr Alcock.

"BVD is primarily spread by persistently infected cattle (PIs) that can often appear perfectly normal. PIs will spread the virus very easily when in close contact with naive (non-vaccinated) cattle. This causes a transient BVD infection that leaves the newly infected cattle more susceptible to pneumonia as well as scours and many other disease conditions.

"Tissue testing for BVD is a relatively new technology, allowing calves to be tested

ideally at birth (when still on the farm of origin) or at calf collection centres. If the test is not done until calves arrive on a new unit, then it must be done while the batch is still isolated from other cattle on the unit."

Ear tag tissue testing of this kind is now being widely promoted by XLVets, of which LLM is a member. The essence of this new BVD Check Tag scheme is to leave tested calves with an easily identifiable (branded) white tag that prompts a prospective buyer to check an online database to see that the animal tested negative (i.e. is not a PI).

Back at Stuchbury Hall, ear tag tissue testing is now carried out on all new calves coming onto the unit, though the initial investigations were carried out by blood testing as calves arrived. The tissue testing now used is an easier process, and provides as good an assurance as is possible that BVD is not being introduced to the unit.

In addition, all calves are vaccinated with Bovilis® Bovipast RSP, which offers the unique combination of key bacterial and viral pneumonia cover and can be administered to calves from approximately two weeks of age.

Mr Tims has also looked at the layout of his buildings, to minimise the mixing of age groups, and has also modified the design of one shed in particular.

"We worked with consultant Jamie Robertson on the elimination of draughts in one building," explains Mr Tims. "The eventual cost was no more than a little time and some ply-board shuttering, but it has removed another potential risk factor where calves were being exposed to draughts."

Four years on from the initial investigations, calf mortality rates at Stuchbury Hall are down below 2% and vet and medicine costs are around one-quarter of previous levels.

The emphasis going forward is on Angus-cross steers, reared to finish at around 340kg carcass weights to supply Dovecote Park for Waitrose.

Feed is almost entirely homegrown, with a proportion of the arable acreage contributing grass silage, whole-crop (oats and peas), barley, oats and beans to the livestock component of the business.

"The cattle enterprise provides important balance on a farm with a good proportion of permanent pasture in environmental schemes," concludes Mr Tims. "The margins are tight enough and you can ill-afford any set-backs due to disease, and certainly not at the levels we were experiencing. We now have a much tighter handle due to the health management regime we have in place, and that's the difference between being sustainable and not." ◀



All calves arriving at Stuchbury Hall are now vaccinated against key bacterial and viral pneumonia threats.