

Vet urges wider use of herd health plans

by Wendy Short

VET Richard Matthews reminded cattle farmers of the importance of herd health planning at a meeting organised by Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services (UTASS). All cattle keepers must have a written herd health plan by law, but Mr Matthews urged producers to use their documents more widely, to help with monitoring their animals and to alert them to any disease build-up at an early stage.

The three main priorities for beef herds should be to produce a high number of healthy calves, to maximise the number of kilograms of beef produced for a predetermined input cost, and to maintain a good standard of herd health with as little vet-

erinary intervention as possible.

"In general, beef producers are doing a good job and there will be no need to make sweeping changes," said Mr Matthews, of Castle Vets, in Barnard Castle.

"However, diseases such as calf pneumonia and scours should be tackled immediately, as they can spread rapidly and limit profitability.

"A close look at production records should highlight any problem areas. If a particular set of figures appears unusual, then it may be worth examining in more detail.

"It is not necessary to address all the issues at once; pick out the most important and focus on that."

He told the meeting at Middleton-in-Teesdale auction mart about one of his Dales-based farmer clients who asked him for



HEALTHY CALVES: herd health plans should be used to monitor animals, says vet Richard Matthews, below

help with putting together a herd health plan. Mr Matthews said: "Just a couple of years earlier, his suck-

ler herd been achieving a fertility rate of 98 per cent for cows put to the bull, which is considered a good target score.

"It had fallen sharply to 85 per cent and he felt the problem warranted further investigation.

"This may not seem like a serious drop in production, but in financial terms, the farm was facing a loss of revenue amounting to six or seven beef animals each year.

"Our first task was to investigate whether bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) was present in the 60-cow herd, and blood-testing revealed that that one nine-month-old calf and an animal aged 21 months were infected.

They were continually shedding the virus and putting the rest of the herd at risk."

The plan for bringing the virus under control included culling the two cattle, which tested positive and vaccinating the rest of the herd, including the stock bull.

Any new purchases would come from BVD-accredited herds only and a policy of vaccinating all new cattle coming onto the farm was put in place.

Within a couple of years, the fertility rate had returned to its previous level of 98 per cent.

Mr Matthews said Northern Ireland had recently introduced compulsory testing for the disease, and Scotland has its own eradication plan.



However, Government funding was not available for farms in England and, therefore, progress on reducing the incidence of BVD had been relatively slow.

"In my opinion, BVD is one of the most damaging cattle diseases that we face in this country," he said. "It has been estimated that about 70 per cent of our animals have been exposed to the virus.

"It is a shame that it has been left to the industry to try and reduce infection levels, but efforts are being made and individual cattle producers can help towards this goal, by monitoring the disease in their herds.

"There are several herd health schemes that include protocols to control BVD, as well as other important diseases, such as infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), leptospirosis, neospora and John's.

"The cost is not prohibitive and I believe that the investment will pay off, in the long term, especially if the herd can achieve disease-free accreditation and sell animals at a premium price."

BVD - the disease
BVD affects the animal's immune system, lowering its resistance to other infections, such as pneumonia and the fatal mucosal disease. Milk production will decline and fertility levels will be reduced.

A cow in early pregnancy may re-absorb the foetus and BVD can also lead to calf deformities, including brain defects, cataracts and general poor health in a later-stage pregnancy.

A small percentage of calves which acquire BVD while still in the womb will become "persistently infected" (known as PI).

Some of these calves may appear healthy, but they will shed large quantities of the virus and can pass on BVD to other animals in the herd.

If a PI female is allowed to breed, its calf will also have PI status.

BVD testing

THE general advice is to blood-test half-a-dozen calves on the farm at about six months old.

Any calf which has a positive result for BVD should be removed from the herd as soon as possible.

The remaining cattle should be tested and vaccinated, with any PIs culled.

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