

MAKING CONTROL:

James Dixon, left, and Andrew Crutchley have strong views on the need to monitor for BVD in their herd



Why it's a 'no-brainer' BVD test should be compulsory

FROM a background in milk production that ended 11 years ago when his family decided dairy expansion was not for them, James Dixon, who farms with his brothers Andrew and Richard and son Steven at Kiterag Farm, Selkirk, near Kemdal, decided to concentrate on beef cattle. The 445-acre Kiterag Farm is run with the adjoining 433-acre Yodpot Farm and a further 120 acres of rented land. The land rises from 600ft above sea level to 1,300ft with all of it in the Less Favoured Area and 80 per cent of it Severely Disadvantaged. Just over 250 acres is enclosed fell. Annual rainfall can be as much as 100 inches.

Previously there was a herd of 40 suckler cows at Yodpot and in 2004 the decision was taken to increase beef cow numbers and, subsequently, switch to the Stabiliser breed. The farm also carries a flock of 1,100 ewes, 800 of which are Swaledales, crossing 500 with the Bluefaced Leicester to produce North of England Mule gimmer lambs. These are mainly sold at the NEMSA September sales with the remainder making up the Mule flock. The farm also has a free range egg enterprise with 12,000 birds accommodated on about 35 acres.

The beef herd, which is closed apart from bought-in breeding bulls, now numbers

200 mainly pure Stabiliser females bred to a Stabiliser bull. Sales of in-calf heifers or cows with calves at foot, made through the Stabiliser Cattle Company (SCC), are an important income stream. SCC stipulates that cattle sold through it have to be in a health scheme, which includes vaccination, and so the herd at Kit Craig is in the SAC Premium Health Scheme.

"We had BVD (Bovine Viral Diarrhoea) in the herd 20 years ago which resulted in stillborn calves, abortions and calves with mucosal disease – ultimately leading to a lot of calf losses," said James. "Although our dairy herd was closed at the time, we ran the sucklers as a flying herd, buying in up to eight bulking heifers or in-calf cows as replacements each year, and we had problems. We then started buying in just heifers and there was a period of respite, but this did not prevent the disease reoccurring so we began vaccinating as part of our disease control."

The herd has now been in the SAC health scheme for five years and maintains a routine vaccination programme with Bovilis BVD. The policy is to monitor BVD by testing for the disease in 10-month-old heifers.

Two years ago after discussion with their vet Andrew Crutchley, of XLVets member practice the Westmorland

BEEF

Running high health Stabiliser suckler cows BVD. Jennifer Mackenzie reports

Veterinary Group, Kemdal, the Dixons started making tests from young calves, as an additional safeguard against the disease.

The relatively new technology enables a sample to be taken as the ear tag is attached to the calf, with the sealed capsule containing the sample then being sent away for analysis. This system is central to a new scheme that is being widely promoted by XLVets with support from MSD Animal Health.

Called BVD Check Tag, the scheme aims to promote the testing of calves and provide verification of a negative test result for the disease through a

central and fully accessible online database.

"The tests will pick up any PIs (persistently infected) calves which can then be taken out of the herd to avoid spreading the disease," explains James. "This gives us added peace of mind. We have at least 10 neighbours with cattle and double-perimeter fencing is not an option. We also send some heifers away from home, although they are not mixed with the other cattle on the farm."

"I think the test should be compulsory – it's a no-brainer. If everyone tested and vaccinated for four years, there would be very few cases of BVD in the country. We also



HEALTHWATCH: Kiterag's Stabiliser cattle

test annually for John's," Andrew said. "When BVD is under control in a herd, health and fertility will improve across the board. It is most important to know your herd's health status and, in particular, your BVD status. "If the disease is present, it is hugely expensive and time

consuming to deal with. By taking a more proactive approach and putting in place a control programme with testing and vaccination, if appropriate, it will free up time for other important management tasks on the farm. It's important to carry out vaccination correctly, however, as failure to do so can jeopardise the level of protection. It is important, for example, to make sure that heifers receive the full primary course of vaccine at least four weeks before the start of the service period." In Andrew Crutchley's opinion, England is in danger of being left behind in the fight against BVD.

"Scotland has started its own campaign which is now in phase three, with a combination of measures in force," he explained. "These measures include a ban on knowingly selling/moving cattle with BVD virus, the need to declare a herd's BVD status before sale, and restrictions on untested herds and animals."

All the male calves at Kiterag, with the exception of four or five with breeding

potential, are castrated at birth and are sold either finished or store, principally off grass at 15 to 16 months old each September through North West Auctions J36 Mart.

The emphasis on veterinary work on the farm has shifted over recent years towards preventative and proactive measures with most of the cost now on vaccination, blood testing and PDs for females.

The ear tissue test, which James carries out himself at tagging, costs £4 per animal. The entire herd at Kiterag is calved over a tight nine-week period, starting on April 20.

Andrew said that up to 90 per cent of Westmorland Veterinary Group's beef and dairy clients now know their herd's BVD status, and, of those, 95 per cent would vacinate against it.

"It's one of the key questions for breeders buying in herd replacements – what is the disease status of that herd? By tagging and testing young stock you are securing the future of your herd, especially in closed units. It means that future breeding stock are clear of BVD and that you are not perpetuating the problem through the herd."

"It is also important to test calves which have died because they could be a PI. Not testing dead calves would be where the system fails because it slips through the net."