

# Editorial

## BVD eradication steps up a gear

BILL Mellor manages a 120-acre mixed beef and sheep farm in Hazel Grove, Stockport. All his beef has been produced on the farm since 2002, when the herd closed after an outbreak of bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD).

Back then, a sudden onset of abortions prompted him to call his vet and together they set about ridding his farm of the disease – something they achieved in just 12 months.

The strategy was simple but rigorous – they tested and vaccinated all cattle, culled any BVD-positive animals and improved biosecurity, as well as putting an end to buying in any new cattle.

Today, not only is his farm BVD-free but Mellor is driving that vision as chair of BVDFree England, a voluntary industry-led scheme working to eliminate BVD in England by 2022.

He maintains that BVD is ‘an easy disease to get on top of’ – it just requires a consistent effort and approach.

The importance of managing the disease consistently was echoed by experts at a BVDFree congress earlier this month, where vets, vet nurses and farmers gathered to assess UK progress on eradicating BVD.

They heard how vets helped turn around another mixed beef and sheep farm in the north east to BVD-free status within 12 months of an outbreak. How? The farm stopped buying-in cattle, began testing all newborn calves and introduced live vaccination and, a year on, all calves have tested negative.

These pockets of successes are encouraging but what does that consistent effort to eradicate BVD look like at a macro level?

Across the UK, it’s very much a mixed picture – with Northern Ireland probably taking the top slot for progress, followed by Scotland, Wales and, finally, England. Ahead of them all is the Republic of Ireland.

The four UK administrations are each taking different routes to tackling BVD and there is a need to consolidate thinking and approach. At an alignment meeting the day before the congress, key players in the ‘BVDFree’ movement agreed to such a plan, committing to work together to produce a review, setting out the different approaches and identifying successful strategies.



**Getting on top of BVD requires a consistent effort and approach**

There is much interest in legislation to compel good practice and prevent infected cattle entering the food chain. Northern Ireland has seen good progress going down this route, reducing disease prevalence by around 40 to 50 per cent since 2013. It now has a well-established framework for controlling BVD, which started out life as a voluntary programme but since 2016 has been compulsory. This means it is now illegal to introduce non-negative animals to other herds.

Northern Ireland is now considering a second phase of legislation to strengthen obligations around disease control, for example introducing additional measures such as herd restrictions and enhanced enforcement powers.

But in England and Wales, there is no legislative backing for a BVD eradication programme and it is still possible – and legal – to sell on persistently infected cattle. There is, however, increasing recognition and sign-up (in England this is heavily influenced by buyers and schemes like the Red Tractor scheme that insist on it). In Wales, where now half the herds are covered by the Gwaredu BVD scheme, farmers are being persuaded by the benefits of being BVD-free.

Of course, cattle farmers’ attention is heavily focused on bovine TB but for Rob Drysdale, a vet and England-based dairy/beef supply chain owner, they just need to hear one key message – BVD affects their bottom line. Because the disease makes production less efficient – BVD-positive animals take longer to rear, get sick and cost money in terms of medication – adopting a BVDFree approach makes financial sense.

It also makes sense for the UK agrifood business. As Wales’ chief vet Christianne Glossop argued, there is a need to focus on future trade – not just at home, or within Europe but across the world. That’s a very good reason why we can expect BVD eradication to step up a gear.

**Adele Waters**

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