

No room for complacency

Make sure you're ready to build on 2008's Bluetongue vaccination programme's success

Bluetongue hit the headlines again in late November when the first case of a new strain of the disease (BTV-1) was confirmed in Lancashire in cattle imported from France. Should producers be unduly concerned about this? And what action should they take in 2009?

Not one new case of Bluetongue (BTV-8) was reported in the UK during the summer (other than other than those seen in animals imported from Europe) – testament to the success of the vaccination programme that was rolled out in the spring. “And producers should be pleased with themselves. The industry has been quick off the mark and worked hard to avoid an outbreak that threatened to be as widespread and devastating as that seen in the Netherlands in 2007,” says vet Jules Dare, of the Sussex-based Westpoint Veterinary Group. “We had one chance – and one chance only – to prevent Bluetongue from becoming endemic in the UK. And we took it.” But the work doesn't end here. Vaccinating stock against the disease in 2009 will be just as crucial as it was this year.

Gain control

“And, just like this year, we can't afford to get it wrong. Producers must vaccinate their stock against the disease as early and as quickly as possible – it's the only way to gain control,” he explains. Complacency in 2009 could allow this devastating disease to establish itself in the UK and, once it does so, it is likely to remain. “It could be tempting to forget about Bluetongue in 2009, and easy to forget too since news about the disease threat isn't hitting the headlines and producers are not, at the moment, unduly concerned. But this would be a bad move and would put the success in controlling the disease this year in severe jeopardy.”

Merial's Brian Rice agrees that there really is no room for complacency – the cost of this disease is phenomenal. The first dairy herd in the UK to be affected in 2007 suffered losses of £30,000 – about one third of its income. The Netherlands reported losses of £65 million as a result of the 2007 BTV-8 outbreak and they're still counting the cost more than a year later, due to the disease's knock-on effects.

Think again

“So I would urge producers who are not considering vaccination to think again. They really will be risking their livelihood – there will be no compensation. And they simply have to be proactive. If they decide to vaccinate when the disease is confirmed on a neighbouring farm, or it is confirmed within their region, it is likely to be too late.”

Geography played a role in the vaccination programme's success, as did East Anglian beef, sheep and dairy producers. Nowhere was the threat posed by Bluetongue more keenly felt than here – the area where the first and most severe outbreaks of the disease were seen in August 2007.

Vaccine uptake was close to 100% in East Anglia, where the first cases of the disease were identified in 2007, and this certainly had a ‘dampening’ effect on the disease, serving to halt its circulation and getting the vaccination control programme off to a flying start, according to Intervet/Schering-Plough's veterinary manager Alasdair King.

“Uptake of the vaccine across the rest of the UK was lower than that seen in East



Jules Dare: “Producers must vaccinate their cattle against Bluetongue in 2009”

Anglia – the average for the whole of England and Wales was between 60% and 65% – but the speed at which the programme was rolled out across the UK meant that it was high enough.”

The industry won the race against the midges that spread the disease from animal to animal. They begin to breed and emerge in significant numbers once temperatures reach above 12°C for a few days. Speed was of the essence to stay two or three weeks ahead of the midges – and the disease – and to avoid it becoming endemic in the UK.

Nasal discharge is just one of the physical symptoms seen in cattle



The midges, which spread the disease from animal to animal, begin to become active in the spring when temperatures reach 12°C

France didn't fair so well. It saw more than 20,000 cases of the disease in 2008. Interestingly, vaccination in France was compulsory in some areas but the way the programme was rolled out and its speed was perhaps not as good as in the UK. This was compounded by the fact that it had a much wider

Lameness can be another indicator that the disease has infected your herd

area of infection to start with. “There's no doubt that the disease was out there, but we had incredible success with the vaccination programme and prevented it from circulating and spreading,” says Mr King.

“We should all give ourselves a well-deserved pat on the back, but don't relax. The threat is still there and, looking forward to 2009, it's still vital that sheep and cattle are vaccinated to prevent the disease from gaining a foothold.”

Early spring

He stresses that it was a race against time in 2008 and it will be a race against time again in 2009.

“But it should be easier to stay ahead of the disease since we won't be waiting for supplies of the vaccine to become available. There's plenty in stock – about 4.5 million doses of the 22.5 million doses initially bought by DEFRA are already available. Further vaccine will then be supplied, like any other vaccine, for vets to order as required.”

Mr King advises producers to be prepared and to vaccinate their stock

again come early spring, before the midges become active. “And, if we manage to keep the disease out of the UK, it's possible that we could be declared disease free if no circulating virus is seen for three years.”

Other strains of Bluetongue including BTV-6 and BTV-1, the first case of which was confirmed in late November in Lancashire in cattle imported from France, are just as ‘nasty’ in sheep as BTV-8 and although they may not cause the same level of clinical signs in cattle they could still result in abortion and other serious symptoms, according to Brian Rice.

“So it's also important that producers avoid importing stock from Europe in 2009 from within the same BTV-8 Protection zone, even if it is legal to do so,” he says.

“BTV-1 and BTV-6 are also circulating within some areas of the BTV-8 zone. They are close to UK borders and, as yet, there's no vaccine to protect stock against them.”

Rachael Porter