Producers warned not to sit back and wait for legislation as BVD control initiatives head south

Scots advance on BVD controls

From January 2014 it was illegal to knowingly sell a BVD persistently infected (PI) animal in Scotland. More controls are expected in 2015. One producer discusses how he is gearing up to the new legislation, Scotland's chief veterinary officer reflects on progress to date and a leading vet advises those further south to monitor the disease regardless of other measures already in place.

text **Karen Wright**

The Wilson family from Castle Douglas, Kirkcudbrightshire, south west Scotland, wanted to officially confirm the Bovine Virus Diarrhoea (BVD) status of their 2,000-cow milking herd and 3,000 youngstock. A family partnership, brothers Andrew and Peter share responsibilities with their father Ronald.

"We'd been vaccinating for 20 years and had little reason to suspect any problems," says Andrew "But we did want to make sure, moving forward, that we were not only protecting herd health as well as we could but that we were also in a position to trade any surplus heifers."

As a result, all milking and in-calf animals were blood tested and they purchased 3,000 Nordic Star tag-and-test button tags for youngstock via the XL Vet Check Tag service.

Results in two days

"This was a far better system for calves and young heifers," adds Andrew. "We tag and test in batches of 300 – a day every month approximately. It's quick, easy and is far less stressful for the animal than blood testing."

Tissue samples are then sent to the NML lab at Hillington for BVD antibody testing with results back on farm and to the vet within 48 hours.

While the blood tests from the herd were negative, four positives were detected in the youngstock. "We blood tested these and found the results were 100% accurate. We took them out of the herd immediately," says Andrew.

The next step on Mayfield Farm is to tag and test calves born from in-calf heifers at the time of blood testing. If all these are clear then the Wilsons will just need to randomly test 10 calves a year. And if these remain clear of BVD antibodies then no further BVD screening will be required.

"We will maintain our biosecurity by making sure we buy any cattle from reliable sources and testing them on arrival, plus sticking to our vaccination programme. We are just about ready for the 2015 legislation should we want to sell any youngstock. It is good to know our BVD status properly and be ahead of the game," adds Andrew.

And the Wilsons preparations are typical of a number of the country's cattle producers, according to Scotland's chief veterinary officer, Sheila Voas. "We believe that almost all, if not all, herds required to test have now tested and for any that have not, their animals are 'restricted'.

"The Scottish Government has committed to supporting an ambitious industry-led scheme to eradicate BVD

Vaccination for BVD may not be water-tight

from Scotland. In 2009 a baseline study suggested that around 40% of the country's herds had been exposed to BVD, and it had between 2,000 and 4,000 PI animals. This really prompted the government to implement a phased BVD eradication programme."

Phase one, which began in late 2010, was a subsidised voluntary screening for BVD followed by Phase two, where mandatory screening requiring all herds in Scotland to test for BVD by February 2013 and annually thereafter.

"In January 2014 we introduced control measures where PI animals and animals from untested herds became 'restricted' and herds had to declare their status at the point of sale," adds Ms Voas."

Andrew Wilson: "It's good to know the BVD status of our herd and be ahead of the game"

"As a result of producer, vet and wider industry engagement in the eradication of this costly disease, the scheme is making good progress. The most recent analysis of the results show that only 18% of Scottish breeding herds are now classed as 'not negative', which means they show exposure to BVD.

"However this analysis has also revealed that there are specific challenges in tackling BVD within the dairy sector. As it stands, only 13% of beef herds are 'not negative' while 50% of dairy herds are classified as showing exposure to the virus. In order to progress the eradication of the disease further, phase four will be introduced in 2015. This will include measures, such as movement restrictions on herds that show exposure to BVD."

Crusade south

Dairy vet Neil Howie has helped NMR develop its CHeCS approved HerdCheck scheme for BVD and has worked with the NFUS, DairyCo, vets and processors to encourage producers to take action.

"BVD control initiatives at a national level will progress south and producers in England and Wales shouldn't wait. Certainly those trading cattle across the border are already obliged to meet Scottish regulations," says Mr Howie. "But regardless of location and regardless

Neil Howie: "All producers should monitor BVD in their herds"

of the vaccination programme, producers should monitor the disease. This is essential to establish protection from vaccine, which may not be as 'watertight' as producers think, or from other measures used in keeping the herd BVD-free."

HerdCheck is best described as a 'belt and braces' approach to BVD control. It includes: blood tests, for beef and dairy and mixed herds; Tag and Test, which is ideal for youngstock as well as adult animals; and an antibody ELISA test and a BVD virus test using PCR technology on milk samples for dairy cows.

Improved picture

"Producers – working with their vets – can select the test or combination of tests that best suits their situation," adds Mr Howie.

"The two milk tests complement each other. Combined results monitor protective antibodies – that can be present due to infection or from vaccination – and pinpoint virus in the herd. This gives a more informative picture, especially in vaccinated herds."

Ideally this bulk milk test, which draws on samples collected by milk buyers for payment testing and held by NML, is carried out quarterly and the results give a risk level with 'red' indicating one or more positive results and an active or recent infection, and 'green' for herds with enough negative results to indicate that the herd is not affected by active BVD infection.

All HerdCheck tests carried out on milk and bloods and results from Tag and Test are reported by email, fax or via NMR Herd Companion. Results highlight where further investigation is required such as the presence of PI animals that need identifying. "The key to addressing BVD is tackling the problem quickly, as soon as it is identified," he adds. |

Tag and Test is a quick, easy and less stressful way of detecting PI's in young animals