

On your marks, get set...

Quick and widespread vaccination will be key to successful bluetongue control in the UK this summer

Read our update, following on from the article that appeared in our January issue about the Dutch experience of bluetongue, to find out how every producer has an important role to play in preventing the disease from getting a long-term foothold in the UK.

We have one chance – and one chance only – to prevent Bluetongue from becoming endemic in the UK. That's the message from vet Jules Dare, of the Sussex-based Westpoint Veterinary Group. "We can't afford to get it wrong and, for this reason, 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.

Mr Dare was involved in a series of meetings held in the south east of England, during late March and early April, held to advise producers on how best to protect their stock – and their businesses – from the disease, which is set to rear its ugly head again on livestock farms across the UK this coming summer.

"We all saw what happened in the Netherlands last summer and there's a real possibility that the same could happen here this year if we don't take steps to safeguard our stock now," he says. "The good news is that we now have a vaccine that can stop it."

The UK is about to face its second 'wave' of the disease and it has the potential to be so much worse than the first, which, compared to how the Dutch fared in 2007, was extremely mild.

"We don't want to see a repeat of what

happened in the Netherlands in 2007 happening here this year. Current estimates put the immediate cost of the disease to the Dutch livestock industry at 81 million Euro, but this doesn't take into account the effect that the outbreak had on dairy cows, which is still being seen in milking herds today. Once these are added the figure could be close to 110 million Euro – a phenomenal cost."

Vaccination scheme

The disease spread right across the country, with the result that all of Holland is now in a protection zone and the Dutch Government has introduced a compulsory vaccination scheme this

Chronic effects

Chronic effects of bluetongue in dairy cows:

- Long-term milk drop
- Decreased fertility – both submission and conception rates
- Long-term lameness problems
- Increased incidence of mastitis
- Foetal loss – abortion and embryo death
- Calf losses – still birth and weak calves
- Weight loss



Jules Dare: "Vaccination can halt the spread of bluetongue"

year, which is being implemented by vets.

"For vaccination to prevent the disease from spreading and taking a foothold in the UK, at least 80% of susceptible animals must be vaccinated and, since the bluetongue virus can also affect wild deer, we really do need to vaccinate all the domestic livestock that we can," explains Mr Dare.

Only stock that's over a month old can be vaccinated. In the meantime, calves should be treated with the only pour-on insecticide licensed for use on calves from birth – Intervet's SWISH – to help

Physical symptoms

Obvious physical symptoms of bluetongue in dairy cows:

- Nasal 'crusting' and discharge
- Oral ulcers
- Lameness/foot swelling
- Conjunctivitis

to keep the midges away from them. "It's important to get the dose right and to repeat every three to four weeks to control midges – not the eight weeks recommended to control flies. And get on and vaccinate your calves as soon as they're old enough," stresses Mr Dare.

There is some anecdotal evidence that garlic, or rather an extract of the plant called alicin – also helps to repel midges. "There's no doubt that some mineral blocks containing garlic extracts are an excellent way to keep flies away, but there's no hard data to demonstrate its

efficacy against midges. And I don't know if the garlic would taint the milk," admits Mr Dare. "But for dry and young stock not in milk, there'd be no harm in giving these blocks a try."

Notifiable disease

The midges that spread the disease are already around and Mr Dare says producers should be vigilant and be on the look out for symptoms. It is, after all, a notifiable disease and producers should report any suspected cases of the disease to Defra or their vet.

As spring turns to summer the threat will increase. Once temperatures reach above 12°C for a few days then midges will start to emerge in significant numbers. "And at temperatures above this the midges begin to reproduce more quickly and the virus begins to replicate within the midge. So keep an eye on spring temperatures, an eye out for midges and a close eye on your stock."

The vaccination plan, as it stands at the moment, is as soon as the vaccine is available to vaccinate all 125 infected

Unwelcome visitors: the midges that spread bluetongue are already around





Just some of the immediate bluetongue symptoms: nasal discharge, left; and sore and swollen feet, right

premises and the farms in the protection zone. The protection zone will then be expanded westwards with the vaccination scheme until all of England is vaccinated. The details of the plan may change in response to clinical cases identified before mid-May.

And the quicker this is done the better since we need to stay two or three weeks ahead of the midges – and the disease – if the UK is to avoid it becoming endemic.

Defra was certainly quick off the mark – the UK government was the first in the EU to order stocks of the vaccine. “It was this firm order for the vaccine that gave the manufacturers the confidence to develop and then make the vaccine as quickly as possible and in sufficient quantities,” says Mr Dare.

As a result, 22.5 million doses are on order – 20 million for England and 2.5 million ear-marked for Wales. The first batch of this order, of at least two million doses, will be delivered in mid-May. A further two million doses will be available every week after that until the 22.5 million doses have been delivered. Everyone who wants to vaccinate their stock will be able to do so.

‘No brainer’

Defra has also been open about how much it paid for the vaccine and has recommended that producers pay between 55p and £1.00 per dose.

“But whatever the cost, vaccinating is a ‘no brainer’. Avoiding just one cow

contracting it and suffering from milk drop alone would more than pay for vaccinating your herd,” says Mr Dare, adding that Westpoint is going to sell the vaccine at 55p a dose. “Dairy cows need two injections, three weeks apart, so that’s £1.10 to protect an animal for a year.

“An added benefit of vaccination, apart from protecting our livestock and our businesses, is that vaccinated stock can be safely – and freely – moved around within the protection zone. There will be no movement restrictions and the practical and financial headaches that can come with them,” says Mr Dare.

Peer pressure

If they haven’t already done so, Mr Dare is urging producers to contact their vet about vaccination.

“It’s up to individual dairy and other ruminant livestock producers to ensure that their herds are vaccinated as quickly as possible and we’re hoping that a degree of peer pressure will get the job done.

“As vaccination is not compulsory, we’re hoping that the drive to get at least 80% of all animals vaccinated will be self policing. If you know someone with pet sheep, for example, urge them to get them vaccinated,” says Mr Dare.

“It’s important that everyone takes this disease seriously. What we saw in 2007 is no reflection of what may happen in the UK in 2008.

We have the tools and the knowledge to

get this right first time with limited cost to the industry. Get it wrong and, as we can see from the Dutch situation, it could prove to be very costly indeed.”

Rachael Porter

On-line info

Intervet has launched a new website designed specifically as a resource for producers, as well as vets and other interested parties, who require detailed information about bluetongue. With sections on the virus, disease identification and managing risk through a policy of vaccination and vector control, the website also contains links to many other useful sources of information and advice.

The website, which can be found at www.bluetongue-info.co.uk, will be continually updated throughout the season.

