

Zero-tolerance approach to PIs

Removing persistently-infected (PI) animals from the herd, as soon as they're identified, is key to the success of the UK's BVD eradication schemes. So why are some producers slow to react and, in far too many instances, retaining PIs?

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

Inital herd testing for BVD is about confirming the presence of the disease in a herd. But it's also about 'outing and ousting' persistently infected (PI) cows and calves.

And there needs to be a renewed focus on tackling PIs. Identifying them and also removing them from the herd should go hand-in-hand and the dual-action should be a priority across all UK herds.

"It doesn't always happen that way," says Boehringer Ingelheim's Matt Yarnall, citing evidence and progress from regional eradication schemes, which are up and running across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Information shared during the 2019 BVDzero Congress served to highlight the importance of removing PIs from the herd, as a key part of a successful control and eradication plan.

Co-ordinated by Boehringer Ingelheim Animal Health, this one-day meeting brought together stakeholders from across the UK and Ireland at a time when, according to the company's Matt Yarnall, a collaborative approach to disease eradication has never been more important.

"The information shared on the day served to highlight just how important it is for producers to cull PIs – remove them from the herd – once they've been identified," he says.

Serious threat

"There was evidence from all four schemes operating across the UK and also the scheme in Ireland to show that this is an area where producers struggle to tackle the disease. Sadly, they then see the damage that hanging on to a PI can do, and they end up learning the hard way. So it's vital to eliminate PIs from the herd – even if she is 'your best cow' or she looks 'OK'," Mr Yarnall says.

"If the test has shown that she's positive, then she's clearly not OK and, in fact, she poses a serious threat to the health of the rest of your herd."

The presentation made by Northern Ireland's Sam Strain, from Animal Health & Welfare NI, focused on the importance of engaging with meat processors in BVD eradication. The BVD eradication scheme has been running in Northern Ireland since 2016 and, to date, 1.8 million animals have been tested – that's 95.8% of all cattle. And, as a result, the country has seen a substantial reduction in BVD.

But top of his list of continuing 'issues' was PI retention: "Too many producers are keeping PIs and those who do cull them are not doing so quickly enough," Dr Strain told delegates.

He said that the challenge facing all schemes was reducing PI retention and its threat to undermine the efficacy of BVD eradication schemes.

"Too many are rearing them to slaughter weights and then culling, to try and maximise their value. But this is posing a significant disease risk on farm."

Matt Yarnall:

"More than 90% said they wouldn't retain PIs again"



Red Tractor Farm Assurance

Red Tractor Farm Assurance standard have recently been updated and now require dairy and beef producers to engage with a BVD control programme. The standards now stipulate that, in order for herds to be compliant, BVD must be managed through an eradication programme designed in conjunction with the farm vet.

The eradication programme may include: participation in national scheme (BVDFree England, the Scottish BVD Eradication Scheme, the Welsh BVD Eradication Programme, or Northern Ireland BVD Eradication Programme); or membership of CHeCS accredited scheme.

There's no legislative requirement to slaughter PI animals. "And producers do find it difficult to euthanise an 'apparently' healthy animal," he says, adding that they have tried some non-legislative approaches. Improved communication has helped to emphasise the importance of removing PIs. And we've removed one key driver for PI retention – the slaughter market."

An agreement reached across the NI industry meant that, as of May 1, 2018, all PI animals born since March 1, 2016, that enter the abattoir are slaughtered and disposed of. "So there's no slaughter market for PI animals that have been finished." The Northern Ireland initiative certainly achieved what it set out to do. "It also sent out a strong signal of industry's appetite to address BVD," says Mr Strain. "Government also got a clear message of industry's willingness to lead. But, most importantly, overall PI disposal rates increased from around 60% to around 70%."

Compelling response

Particularly compelling was the response of producers in the National BVD Survey who'd retained PIs who, when asked if they'd do so again, said 'no'. "More than 90% said they wouldn't retain PIs again – they'd clearly learned a tough lesson about the risk that these animals pose to the rest of the herd. There's no doubt that this initiative will be playing a key role in reducing the prevalence of BVD in Northern Ireland," adds Mr Yarnall. "But retention of PIs remains an impediment."

He says that there's a still a lack of awareness and knowledge, despite extensive communication, of the risk that PIs pose to the rest of the herd – and the damage that they can do. "There's also possibly an unwillingness to believe test results or for some producers not to take notice of the results and to carry on regardless."

BVD control pointers

- Testing: both at herd and then individual level (cows and calves) for persistently infected (PI) animals
- Removal of PIs
- Biosecurity measures, to prevent disease from entering the herd
- Vaccination, to prevent new PIs from being produced



Sam Strain:

"Too many producers are keeping PIs or not culling them quickly enough"

Mr Yarnall believe that additional measures to ensure that producers remove PIs promptly may be necessary.

"The Northern Ireland experience is food for thought for schemes across the UK."

That said, he adds that no other country has achieved BVD-free status without government legislation and regulations being put in place.

"But these steps will only be taken if there's a willingness from the industry to take steps to tackle the disease at farm level. Only then will government bodies step in to offer the final push or incentive to make sure such schemes work."

And it's producers who will, ultimately, benefit from the improved health, fertility and productivity of a BVD free herd. So it's up to them to recognise the threat that this disease poses to their businesses.

"A key part of that is removing PIs from the herd." |

