

PROVIDING A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO BVD CONTROL

Animal Health Ireland (AHI) held its first major conference on Thursday November 12 at the Cork Marts premises in Corrin, Fermoy. The conference, on the subject of Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD), was attended by approximately 250 delegates, representing AHI stakeholders, beef and dairy farmers, veterinarians, farm advisors, animal health service providers and academics. The principal objective of the conference was to present a new resource, developed by the AHI expert group (Technical Working Group [TWG]), to assist farmers and vets to tackle BVD in a systematic manner. The conference heard how AHI intends to deliver this and other resources over the months and years to come. There was a strong interest from delegates throughout the event: many of the questions raised reflected a good deal of knowledge of the disease and there was an evident desire for additional resources to be made available to support programmes of control at farm level.

The case for tackling BVD was made in the keynote speech by Prof. Joe Brownlie of the Royal Veterinary College, and in two case studies, one of which was presented by Michael Sexton of the Riverview Veterinary Practice in Bandon, and the other by Noel Byrne, manager of the Teagasc research farm at Ballydague, Fermoy. Prof. Brownlie provided an overview of the epidemiology of BVD, placing particular emphasis on the important role of the Persistently Infected (PI) animal. In contrast to the situation in Ireland and the UK, where no national programme of control is in place, a number of national programmes are operating in continental Europe. Those in the Scandinavian countries have already successfully eradicated BVD, with great benefits in both productivity and health of their cattle. Indeed, even within the UK, the disease has already been eradicated in the Shetland and Orkney Islands, and some of the devolved administrations in Great Britain are seriously considering establishing national programmes. Prof. Brownlie argued that BVD control in Ireland and the UK is both desirable and feasible, given that diagnostic tests and vaccines are both of a good standard. He described the key components of a successful approach to BVD eradication as comprising: education; biosecurity; commitment; and a strategic plan. Michael Sexton's case study dealt with a 150-cow, spring-calving dairy herd, in which the clinical evidence of BVD infection was very slight and the intervention was driven by the farmer's goal of ensuring that his herd was free of BVD. The subsequent investigation revealed a number of PI animals, which were promptly removed on identification. Following removal of this source of infection, a control plan

has now been put in place, the principal components of which are biosecurity, bio-immunity (mainly vaccination) and ongoing surveillance for new PI animals. The case study presented by Noel Byrne differed from the first, in that the initial impetus for investigation was a marked drop in fertility, manifested by a 10% reduction in the pregnancy rate to first service and a very significant increase in the rate of embryo loss. Investigation for BVD revealed the presence in the herd of three PI animals, the progeny of dams that had tested negative for BVD when introduced into the herd three years previously. The calves born from these negative dams were not tested for BVD virus, however, and so remained undetected in the replacement heifer group. The losses incurred on the Ballydague farm, although significant, would, in all likelihood have been substantially worse on a normal commercial farm where scanning regimes would be unlikely to be as intensive as those at Ballydague.

Joe O'Flaherty, CEO of AHI, presented an overview of the work of the AHI TWG on BVD. The centrepiece of this work, to date, has been the development of clear and agreed guidelines for BVD control. Currently in draft form, these documents will be refined by graphic designers, social scientists and focus groups, before being made available by year end to farmers and veterinarians in the form of a Farm Note (a one-page summary guide) and a Technical Guide to BVD Control. Joe O'Flaherty took delegates through the key steps in the document, which encompasses the four classical stages of disease control (planning, investigating, controlling and monitoring). Subsequent editions of this column will present these documents in greater detail.

In parallel with the development of this informational resource, AHI has embarked on a collaborative project with the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation (ICBF), the aim of which is to provide farmers and vets with web access to relevant information (including bulk sample and individual animal test results and vaccination history) to support future BVD control programmes on individual farms.

Beyond the level of the individual farm, the TWG will produce a report outlining a series of policy options for the control of BVD at regional or national level. This report will outline the factors constraining progress towards national BVD control and, where possible, will identify how these constraints might be addressed. Following delivery of the report, AHI will initiate a national consultation process with all stakeholders, the results of which will be made available in the coming year.