

Make 2013 the year you find out your herd's BVD status and tackle it, once and for all

What's your excuse?

Three years on, how is Scotland's BVD eradication scheme progressing? And how close to launch are similar programmes for the rest of the UK's dairy producers? We spoke to those in the know to find out more.

text Rachael Porter

Scotland's BVD eradication programme is entering its third year and, according to vet Richard Booth from the Royal Veterinary College, the scheme is now entering a compulsory stage. "This means that producers who have not voluntarily taken part in the scheme so far now, by law, have to test to ascertain their herd's BVD status. All Scottish breeding herds have to be screened by February 2013 and other herds that expect to sell animals must have those animals tested within 40 days of birth," he says.

"It's a way to ensure that those who've been reluctant to take part get involved and it's vital that they do test to determine their herd status if Scotland is going to successfully eradicate this insidious disease."

This compulsory aspect of the scheme was always part of the plan, to include herds that didn't volunteer during the first phase. The initial tests cost around £30 per herd, although this will vary depending how the tests are carried out, herd size and the number of management groups.

Some have been willing to find out their status and take steps to deal with BVD if necessary. There will also be people who are unwilling to take part.

That was certainly the case in the Scandinavian schemes. Sweden, Norway and Finland all introduced legislation to 'mop up' farms and

bring them into their eradication programmes

And it worked – all three countries are now BVD free. The 2012 phase of the eradication programme focused on getting herds to test for BVD and find out their status.

"In spring 2013 producers will be urged to voluntarily disclose the BVD status of their herd, or individual animals, at sales ahead of compulsory declarations coming in in late Autumn 2013," says NFU Scotland's animal health policy manager Penny Johnston.

"This allows buyers to make an informed choice and is the next vital step in both ensuring that herds that have achieved BVD-free status can remain so."

Movement restrictions

She adds that, in the future, when herds have had a chance to get to grips with BVD, and the number of positive herds has fallen, legislation will be introduced to restrict the movement of animals from herds that do not have a BVD-free status, only allowing the sale of animals that have been individually tested virus free.

"That will provide the final impetus for those final few producers who've not taken steps to control BVD in their herd to act. The date for implementation of this stage is not set but it is planned as part of the programme."

Looking south of the border, the next step in terms of BVD eradication is to introduce effective schemes across the rest of the UK.



Initial tests, to determine a herd's BVD status, cost around £30 per herd

"The Scottish experience shows that producers are willing to take part. Success can also be pretty quick, compared to other diseases. If we were to introduce a programme to control Johne's disease, we'd be looking at a much longer-term and more complicated project," says Dr Booth.

"The positive aspect of tackling BVD like this is that we have solid, reliable tests that work and we have a greater understanding of the disease – in other words we know how it spreads and we know how to identify carriers and how to contain the disease."

What the UK is still lacking, according to Dr Booth, and what may be preventing some producers from tackling the disease at herd level without the need for a compulsory element or legislation – on a local or national basis – is cost-benefit data.

"Figures showing the true cost of BVD for infected herds would provide most producers with the impetus to find out their status and, if needs be, tackle the disease. That said, we do have a wealth of anecdotal evidence that's extremely compelling."

BVD's profoundly negative impact on herd fertility is well known, as is its effect on calf health. "And we know that when producers begin to get on top of the disease that they see almost immediate improvements in both, which then gives them the impetus to keep going and to continue to work towards eradicating it from their herds," adds Dr Booth.

The cost of BVD should be enough to spur producers into action. University of Reading researchers estimate that the disease costs the beef and dairy industries around £40 million each year. "Yet many individual producers struggle to see how they fit into that data. Past studies and surveys have estimated that,

on average, 65% of herds will be actively infected with BVD. Our research in Somerset has shown that, at any one time, 60% of herds are infected by the virus. So it really is something that most producers should be thinking about, particularly if they're having problems with calf mortality and poor fertility."

Knowledge-transfer campaign

Rural Development Programme for England funding has just been obtained in England, to support a knowledge transfer campaign on BVD up to March 2014. This is being managed by AHDB (DairyCo/Eblex), working with commercial vets and others in the cattle industry.

A cross-sector working group has been set up to guide this campaign, and to help formulate plans for a more sustained BVD control initiative beyond March 2014.

Similar discussions are going on in Wales, recognising the need for a complementary approach between such close trading neighbours.

It is calculated that on average BVD infection costs cattle producers – beef and dairy – around £37/cow/year. So an average 130-cow dairy herd could benefit by £4,800 per year.

With that figure in mind, producers should be willing participants and many are already working with their vet to rid their herds of the disease.

Testing is readily available, cost effective and it works. It's relatively easy to identify and cull PI animals and to introduce a vaccination policy where necessary.

Many producers are also tightening up their biosecurity measures, particularly when buying in stock.

But introducing a national scheme, with legislation, will help to ensure that their efforts are not in vain. |



NML launches PCR service for BVD screening

NML has launched a new bulk milk BVD qPCR service that can offer producers, via their vets, a simple and easy method to detect BVD virus in the bulk tank.

"Antibody testing on a routine basis is useful for many herds to show if the herd has been exposed to virus", says NML Healthcheck manager Steve West. "But we know that vaccine response can make interpretation difficult, so by bringing in the complimentary service qPCR that can identify and quantify the actual virus, we have a more

comprehensive system that will provide vets with much more information about the BVD status of a milking herd".

NML's BVD qPCR service is offered on both an ad hoc basis and a quarterly basis. The service is aimed at vets to assist them in supporting their clients with an initial surveillance package.

The test is carried out on milk samples already held by NML for payment purposes. There is no need for additional sampling.

