

Inconsistent approach to BVD by farmers, survey reveals

FEWER than 50 per cent of farmers tested their herd for bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) over the past 12 months, an industry-led survey has revealed.

Results from the Farming Against BVD (FAB) survey were presented by an independent expert panel at Novartis Animal Health headquarters, providing insight into dairy and beef farmers' practices, attitudes and understanding of the virus.

The findings showed farmers had an "inconsistent approach" to tackling the disease, which is contributing to the financial burden it places on the dairy industry in particular, thought to be around £60m a year.

More than 300 dairy and beef farmers took part in the survey from every region of England and Wales, representing more than 70,000 head of cattle.

The project was driven by a select panel of industry experts, including RCVS chairman of the BVD scientific and technical working group Joe Brownlie, Novartis vet Caroline Dawson, herd manager at Brighthams Farm Tony Brooks, and McMurtry and Harding vet James Russell.

According to Mr Russell, the survey reinforced that much more work needed to be done in providing practical advice about how farmers can eradicate the virus in their herds.

"BVD is a serious, industry-wide problem and one farmers are clearly aware of, with more than 70 per cent of respondents having a herd health plan that incorporated BVD," he said.

"What is deeply concerning

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is 49 per cent of farmers questioned had not tested their herd for BVD in the past 12 months and of those that did, 83 per cent did not go on to test their youngstock.

"So while farmers may be aware of BVD, there appears, on this evidence, to be a disconnect between awareness and practical activity in the detection and then eradication of infection from their herd."

National programme

Central to the discussion was the need for a national eradication scheme in England.

The success of a national programme in Europe was seen in Scandinavia in the early 1990s, and several other countries have followed, including Ireland and Scotland.

The programme in Ireland, for example, is coordinated by Animal Health Ireland and supported by legislation, with requirements including mandatory testing of all calves, a ban on the sale of calves with negative test results and follow-up testing where persistently infected animals (PIs) are identified.

According to Prof Brownlie, a high level of compliance and a legal framework in which to operate, as seen in Ireland and parts of Europe, is pivotal to the success of a programme.

"The Scandinavians have done it, the Swiss have done



James Russell, Caroline Dawson, Tony Brooks and Joe Brownlie at the presentation.

it, the Austrians have a national programme and many other European countries have regional schemes," he said.

"Now Scotland has a good programme and Ireland and Northern Ireland have joined them, so we are rather behind in England. There is a legal framework and they all do it together. They behave awfully well in Norway and Sweden – the farmers behave nicely and the vets are really very pleasant with each other.

"In our country, we're all mavericks."

Under a national scheme, BVD can be eradicated in 10 years, as evidenced in some European countries, says Prof Brownlie.

However, significant hurdles are still to be negotiated, he said, with questions remaining about funding and who would coordinate the scheme.

"Defra will not fund or orchestrate an endemic disease programme," he said.

"Industry is trying to get it together and Dairy Co is talking to Eblex and Eblex is talking to the BCVA. My model would be an independent body like Animal Health Ireland, which is

funded by a number of agencies – Defra, the levy body and perhaps even some from the wholesale industry.

"Also, none of the schemes in Europe have done anything on endemic diseases without a legal framework, a mandatory basis. It's very powerful to say you can't legally trade in animals that haven't been tested for BVD."

Partnership approach

Meanwhile, the panel encouraged vet practices to work together to develop regional schemes, an example of which can be found in Derbyshire and is led by Mr Russell's practice.

"We are really pleased all of the leading farm animal practices in our areas have come together to say this is a disease we have to get hold of," he said.

"It's an initiative we're on the cusp of rolling out to our clients. The Derbyshire group is solely reliant, at the moment, on the goodwill of the practitioners and drug companies.

"That's not a basis on which to build a national eradication programme for a disease that is costing us as much

as we've heard this morning."

While effective vaccination against BVD has been available for the past two decades, the disease continues to cause significant problems in the cattle industry, with infected cattle suffering from abortion, infertility and suppressed immune systems, leading to poor productivity.

Moreover, while BVD is regarded by farmers as one of the top bovine diseases, other health issues, such as mastitis and tuberculosis, are given much greater attention.

According to Miss Dawson, the lack of focus on BVD is exacerbated by the lack of sound information on the financial implications of the infection on herds.

"Perhaps by aiding understanding of the financial cost of the virus, we can encourage farmers to take more proactive steps to combat BVD," she said.

"As such, I am pleased to announce the FAB panel has initiated a follow on project to carry out detailed research with regards to the financial impact of BVD on farms and is due to report in the new year."