

Need for biocontainment of the BVD virus

There is an urgent need for the BVD virus (BVDV) to be biocontained (securely segregated) and stamped out in NI. Biocontainment needs to be on several levels: within NI, so that the virus does not spread to other jurisdictions from breakdown herds exporting cattle from NI or from breakdown herds located close to the border; within farms, so that the virus does not spread to neighbouring or contact herds from BVD breakdowns; and within farm units, so that the virus cannot spread from a BVD Positive animal to other cattle managed on the holding. Latest figures show that 72 BVD Positive cattle in 52 herds have been retained for more than 4 weeks since disclosure of their results. Of these retained cattle, 28 are more than 6 months old, and thus present an ongoing serious risk to other livestock.

A study of BVD seroprevalence in the cattle population in the ROI published in June 2022,¹ which examined the exposure that cattle had to BVDV (by measuring the level of antibodies in blood serum) between 2017 and 2020, indicated that herd location, increased herd size and dairy production were associated with increased probability of virus exposure. It was of note that, in a model that ranked counties, the three counties with the highest risk of BVDV exposure were Donegal, Monaghan, and Cavan, all of which border NI. NI has a considerably higher disease prevalence than the ROI; a high prevalence of BVDV and increased spatial BVDV risk in two border areas within NI have previously been documented.

Recent changes to exporting rules for cattle being moved out of NI to EU Member States with an approved BVD Programme or BVD free status mean that cattle being sold to buyers from the ROI now must comply with additional requirements. They must either come from herds recognised by DAERA as being BVD-free or be subject to additional measures at the owner's expense, such as approved quarantine for 21 days and/or added testing, including significant requirements for pregnant stock. These extra checks are required to allow official veterinary certification of the export. Once the ROI is recognised as being BVD-free, cattle that have been vaccinated against BVD will not be permitted to enter.

To have NI recognised as being BVD-free under the EU Animal Health Regulation, at least 99.8% of the establishments representing at least 99.9% of the bovine population must be free from BVD. At present this equates to all but approximately 45 herds and 1,675 bovine animals being free from BVD. On 1st January 2022, there were 129 herds that had living cattle with initial positive results. In addition, there must have been no confirmed cases of BVD in the herd during the previous 18 months: while not directly comparable, in the past 18 months in NI, there have been over 1,900 initial positive results to BVDV tests.

Industry continues to make representations to DAERA regarding further essential developments, in addition to herd restrictions, that are essential for NI to achieve BVD eradication. Basic information on herd level BVD statuses needs to be introduced as an enhancement to the Programme, in part to allow potential costs to cattle farmers who wish to sell breeding stock to the ROI and other EU Member States to be minimised.

Farmers with BVD breakdowns in their herds continue to be asked by AHWNI to deal with BVD Positive cattle with extreme caution and using strict isolation, to ensure biocontainment of the virus by minimising the risk of infected material being transferred within their farms or to other farms. An animal with a BVD Positive or Inconclusive result may be retested (using a blood sample taken by a private vet) and any Persistently Infected (PI) animals should be culled at the earliest opportunity.

Note for editors:

1. BVD seroprevalence in the Irish cattle population as the national BVD programme progresses toward eradication.

Barrett et al (2022) [BMC Veterinary Research](#) volume 18, Article number: 210 (2022)

2. AHWNI is responsible for the delivery of the Northern Ireland Bovine Viral Diarrhoea Eradication Scheme. For more information on the operation of the Scheme, please contact AHWNI (email info@animalhealthni.com, tel. 028 7963 9333) or visit the AHWNI website www.animalhealthni.com.