

Vets reflect on the toll of putting down multiple BVD Positive calves

Several highly respected large animal vets have spoken about the effect that having to cull BVD Positive calves on an ongoing basis on numerous farms has on them and their colleagues. Many farmers in BVD breakdown situations call on their own private vet to carry out the task of euthanising young calves: this is carried out on farm, with the owners then having to arrange for disposal of the carcasses. In July and August alone BVD Positive results have been declared for 374 calves; 221 of these calves have been put down, with more to follow as retesting results become available. While figures are not available for the number of calves put down solely by vets, the issue of culling is being faced by vets across NI on a daily basis.

Phil Walsh of Orchard Vets, Armagh, has commented on the impact on practising vets of having to put down multiple BVD Positive calves, saying, "As a vet, I know that I am doing the right thing in euthanising calves that are Persistently Infected with the BVD virus, as these calves are a liability for the future health of their herds. However I find it disappointing that we still have to destroy so many PI calves at this stage of the eradication scheme. We know the science behind BVD control works, so it's inexplicable that there has not been a major effort put in to limit the spread of the virus. For example, many farmers are not aware that their neighbours have BVD infection in their herds and so calves are being put down at present that should never have been exposed to BVD. This is an avoidable welfare issue, both for the cattle involved and for the farmers concerned."

John Johnston of Fairgreen Veterinary Centre, Fintona stated, "In our practice, a good part of our work is focused on helping farmers to improve herd fertility, so it is extremely unpleasant to deal with sporadic and unexpected outbreaks of BVD where several calves have to be put down at once. It is also frustrating to find out when I am talking through a breakdown situation with a farmer that they may have purchased cattle from BVD breakdown herds unwittingly, as there is no official way of knowing that a herd is high risk. As a result of the BVD virus leaving those farms, either in transiently infected animals, 'Trojan' dams or on contaminated material or equipment, the welfare of unborn calves in clean herds is being compromised. The sight of BVD Positive calves being put down can be a very stressful experience for those farmers and their vets."

Keith Sheridan of Parkview Veterinary Clinic, Strabane, has said, "Vets do their best to care for animals and so it is not easy to have to put down calves on farms on a regular basis. The control of BVD through the BVD Programme is unique in this respect, as when cattle are to be culled for other reasons such as TB, they are taken away from the farm to a slaughter plant to be culled. With BVD, in most cases farmers are calling on their own vet to do the culling for them, which means that, in addition to the disease being extremely disheartening for many farmers, vets in our practice are having to deal with case after case of avoidable BVD infection. I find it hard to understand why a full programme of actions has not been put in place to deal with, among other things, the significant trade barrier that is in place with the south where such good progress has been made in tackling BVD. There is so much to be gained through eradicating BVD here, including the potential reduction in antibiotic usage that would lead to decreased levels of Anti-Microbial Resistance."

BVD infection levels remain higher than they were at the end of 2020 with over 1,700 herds having at least one case disclosed in the last year. The BVD Implementation Group continues to request that DAERA, rather than taking a staged approach, puts a range of necessary measures in place simultaneously at the earliest opportunity.