

Tackling endemic disease can be key in combatting climate emissions conference

Agri-food industry leaders heard from experts from across Europe at a major conference this week on the link between good animal health and lower greenhouse gas emissions.

Convened by Animal Health and Welfare NI (AHWNI), the “Healthy Animals - Healthy Environment,” conference explored how tackling endemic disease can go hand in hand with the fight against climate change, and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from farms.

Sponsored by DAERA and the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC), the event took place at the Hilton Hotel, Templepatrick on Wednesday, with speakers including Dr Philip Skuce from the Moredun Institute Edinburgh, Dr Inge Santman-Berends from the Royal GD in the Netherlands and Edwin Poots MLA, Minister for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs.

Speaking after the event, Dr Sam Strain, CEO, Animal Health and Welfare NI (AHWNI) said:

“The need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and overall carbon footprint on-farm is something the industry is taking very seriously, and through our conference we explored how this aim can be achieved through tackling endemic disease. As recent studies have shown, poor animal health is a major constraint on efficient livestock production, and therefore a significant root cause of excess emissions.

Tackling endemic disease has a clear impact on farm efficiency by increasing growth rate, reducing days to slaughter, and increasing reproductive performance. This in turn will reduce methane emissions, potentially by as much as 10%.

We were delighted to welcome two experts from academia who shared insights on just how important tackling endemic disease, such as BVD, is not just to improving animal health and overall farm productivity, but also significantly improving environmental and climate outcomes. Dr Philip Skuce from the Moredun Institute in Edinburgh shared key findings from his recent report “Acting on Methane,” which sets out a roadmap for beef, dairy and sheep farmers on the methane impacts of diseases like BVD, and the environmental gains that can be realised through improved disease control.

Likewise, we were grateful to hear from Dr Santman-Berends, who shared learnings from the Netherlands and across Europe. The Netherlands has been at the cutting edge of mitigating endemic disease, and we believe that there are significant lessons to be learned from the Dutch experience for Northern Ireland, given the similarities of the two jurisdictions in terms of dependence on livestock production and endemic disease risks.

This conference comes at an important time as ministers work on future agricultural policy and the green growth agenda. Endemic disease control is a vital tool in reducing the environmental footprint of ruminant farms, and this conference will be a key knowledge-sharing opportunity as industry and government develop future strategies to mitigate endemic disease in Northern Ireland.

Minister Poots said, “I am delighted to open the conference today on “healthy animals, healthy environment,” marking AHWNI’s 10 year anniversary. AHWNI has made a significant impact since its formation in 2012 becoming the principal organisation within Northern

Ireland with responsibilities for developing programmes to assist farmers in tackling some of the most important endemic diseases of cattle including BVD and Johne's Disease. In addition, AHWNI has become a provider of farmer training and an important research partner in animal health.

Endemic disease on farms has a direct impact on greenhouse gas emissions as livestock productivity will drop through reduced yields, fertility issues or early mortality or culling. This in turn increases the amount of emissions per unit of animal product. AHWNI is a valued partner for my Department and I look forward to all that will be achieved in the next 10 years too with the dual aims of improving animal health and reducing greenhouse gas emissions."

