

As all cattle keepers will be aware, from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2013 the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) have introduced tighter control measures for the control of Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) in England and Wales as everyone in the industry continually strives to halt the spread of this disease. The previous protocols were based on the historical bTB situation, whereas the new testing regime has been developed by looking at the current and predicted future picture.

A major change is that testing regimes for bTB are now established on a county basis, rather than the old parish system. Another is that bTB testing intervals are either annual in the high risk areas or every four years in the low risk areas. Two and Three year testing intervals no longer exist. Very fortunately, Cumbria with its high cattle population is still classed as a low risk county and therefore the vast majority of farms are on four yearly testing regimes. There will always be those farms however in any region that are classed as higher risk (such as bull hiring herds, heifer rearers and the like) and will be tested appropriately.

The policy has also changed when a bTB breakdown occurs in the low risk areas. Previously, the particular parish involved would be counted as high risk and be subjected to enhanced testing and surveillance; everyone realised that different parishes were different sizes, with different geography and hugely different cattle populations and densities, but parish testing was what had been accepted by Europe – even though science and common sense suggested otherwise. Things are going to be much more reasonable from now on.

In the case of a bTB breakdown, the surveillance zone will be an area in a 3 km radius from the outbreak, very similar to that used in the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak of 2001. It is thought that on average in Cumbria this would involve 16-18 herds. The cattle in this area will be tested as soon as possible after the confirmed breakdown, and then the holdings treated as high risk – ie they will go onto an annual testing regime and have to bTB test animals pre-movement. The other potentially significant change in the rules is that after pre-movement bTB testing, the animals only have 30 days to move (rather than the previous 60 days), but at the same time cannot be re-tested within 60 days of the last test.

With this new regime for responding to a bTB breakdown, DEFRA believe that outbreaks will be dealt with in a much more effective and efficient manner, with potentially the area regaining its low risk status in perhaps a couple of years, compared to a minimum of six to seven years under the old parish based system.

DEFRA has a good record of clearing bTB when a breakdown occurs in a low risk region such as Cumbria, with the combination of slaughter of reactor animals, movement restrictions and enhanced surveillance. That is because at this time in our area there is no evidence of any wildlife

reservoir of bTB, obviously in sharp contrast to other parts of the country. And long may it stay that way.

At a recent meeting jointly held by the National Farmers Union (NFU) and the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA) one of the speakers commented that 'the only way bovine TB will arrive in Cumbria is on the back of a wagon'. It is likely to come into the region via an affected animal from the high risk area of the country where bTB is endemic (ie well established in a particular population of animals). It is thought that the large conurbation of Greater Manchester, and the Manchester Ship Canal act as sufficient barriers to the spread of any wildlife infection. It is therefore up to everyone to consider very carefully where and how they source their stock.

Obviously it would be unfair to brand all cattle coming from the annual testing regions of the country as 'dirty', but at the same time in general they have to be considered to be carrying a higher risk of harbouring bTB than animals from four yearly testing areas. It is estimated that on average a bTB breakdown in a low risk area costs the farming community £30,000. £10,000 of this is lost by the breakdown farm, the rest is the cumulative loss of his or her neighbours.

So how can you minimise the risks? Certainly buying cattle that have spent their entire lives in the low risk area would be the best, but unless you are buying the animals directly this may be difficult to establish. You may buy an animal through a Cumbrian auction from a Cumbrian vendor, but the animal itself may have been on a number of previous holdings, something you only find out once you arrive back home with its passport. Animals that have come directly from the high risk area will of course have had to be pre-movement TB tested within the prior 30 days.

Isolating newly purchased animals is an essential step in all disease control for everyone's herd; unfortunately this is not a routine practiced by enough stock keepers. In relation to bTB, arranging a private post-movement TB test of any purchased animals while they are still in isolation would reduce the risk to your other stock, remembering that the test has to be carried out at least 60 days after any previous testing. If animals are harbouring bTB, it is better to know about it as soon possible before it has the chance to spread to others.

Is it not worth doing everything you can to keep bTB out of your farm, your neighbours' farms and Cumbria?