Reviewing bovine TB control in Devon

Views on control methods were exchanged in a meeting attended by vet Dick Sibley, TB activist Brian May and a range of professionals involved with TB control.

The opening Western Counties Veterinary Association (WCVA) meeting of 2019 attracted a broad church of people to listen to Dick Sibley report on the findings of an alternative approach to the control of bovine tuberculosis (bTB) and discuss the way forward. A slightly more formal presentation had been delivered at the BCVA Congress meeting in October 2018, but this evening was more directed at working cattle vets in Devon.

Defra and APHA advisors, wildlife protectors, testing developers and Cymorth TB managers shared understanding with Devon-based farmer Robert Reed, who had engaged in an in-depth alteration to management of his cattle to reduce the financial and practical burden of bTB.

The topic received lots of public interest, particularly thanks to the involvement of musician and TB activist Brian May, who explained his role in supporting farmers and vets to control bTB and protect badgers.

The TB control strategy, led by cattle vet Dick Sibley, involved the use of Actiphage to clear a dairy herd that had been suffering with TB since 2012. Measuring the presence of live bacteria in the blood was incorporated as a complementary method to other techniques. The method was claimed to enhance early detection and containment of the infected cattle.

Many people have visited the test farm and the programme is likely to be rolled out in Wales, involving as many farmers in the Gower peninsula as wish to participate. It is well recognised that it is the willingness and dedication of the farmer that will determine the effectiveness of the programme. Recognition that herds with repeated skin test failures are a risk to their neighbours may prove to be a significant factor in the programme, and how this comes about is an essential start to understanding disease control options.

The test farm – Gatcombe Farm, run by Robert and Thomas Reed – is located near Seaton in Devon. The farm is an intensively managed dairy herd with five robot milking parlours and an extensively managed beef herd. The dairy cows stay in their robot group, do not graze and are housed 24/7. Bovine TB has been detected in the dairy cows for years, with repeated failures and over 100 animals slaughtered. The farmer was simply fed up with the time, effort and money involved in having repeat testing with no apparent endpoint. His challenge to his veterinary practice was to control the disease and allow the herd to be managed to maximum benefit without having to keep more animals than wanted because of trading restrictions.

Initial analysis of the testing history showed that only the dairy cows had bTB failures, with no animals from the beef herd failing the skin test. The audience was asked to indicate whether they felt that, within their practice, bTB was being controlled and that the plan to eliminate the disease by 2035 seemed likely. Very few vets raised their hands, but when asked whether they were dissatisfied with progress, there was a forest of arms raised aloft. How many of the vets would be prepared to put in the time and effort needed to help their clients wasn’t asked. More information was awaited by the WCVA members.

The role of badgers

The fact that the beef cows graze the pasture but have no bTB failures was an obvious anomaly and the involvement of badgers was investigated. Setts were located, and dung samples sent to Warwick University, with the finding that M. bovis was present at many locations. Wildlife cameras showed that there was a great deal of badger activity around the woods and pastures but no penetration into the buildings housing the dairy herd. This led to a greater understanding of “infected”, “infectious” and “shedding”.

Analysis of the number of organisms in badger dung and cattle dung, and the volumes of dung excreted,