

Don't hesitate to vaccinate

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A Dutch farmer affected by bluetongue disease advises UK livestock producers to protect against the disease with vaccination, as Julian Cooksley reports

Livestock farmers in the UK should not hesitate to vaccinate their stock as an insurance policy against bluetongue, according to a Dutch dairy farmer and industry consultant who has experienced first-hand the devastating impact which the disease can have on the livelihoods of farmers and the welfare of their livestock.

"As a farmer, you never think that bluetongue will affect you, until it does," states Jakob Pustjens. "Unfortunately, by the time livestock show visible signs of the disease it's too late to do anything to prevent it. My advice, based on my experience on our own farm, together with that of other livestock producers I have spoken to throughout The Netherlands, is that farmers should take whatever preventative measures are available, at an early stage, before bluetongue is diagnosed in their area."

In addition to managing his family's herd of 100 Holstein Friesian dairy cows and 90 heifers on their 40-hectare farm at Nederweert, close to The Netherlands' borders with Belgium and Germany, 29-year-old Jakob is an agricultural management consultant. Having been involved in the business for a number of years, he now spends three days a week providing economic and management advice to farmers across a large area in the south of the country. Well-informed to comment on the spread of bluetongue in The Netherlands, Jakob states:

"When bluetongue was first diagnosed in The Netherlands during 2007 very few people in the industry knew anything about the disease. Certainly, most farmers had no idea of what to look for, or the devastation which it could cause. Initially, bluetongue affected only a few sheep farms, but very quickly they found themselves with a lot of dead sheep, which was a very harsh lesson. It wasn't long before cattle were also showing signs of bluetongue, such as excessive salivation, discharges from the nose and eyes, inflamed feet and swollen heads. Eventually, these animals became reluctant to eat, lethargic, suffered abortions late in pregnancy, levels of mortality increased and milk yields were reduced.

"Many farms in my region were very badly affected. One of my clients saw their average annual milk yield decline very quickly, from over 7500 litres to less than 6000 litres, while on another high-performing unit the average daily yield fell from over 40 litres to under 10 litres in less than a month. A quarter of the herd eventually had to be slaughtered and even when the farm was declared free of the disease it was subsequently difficult for them to get milk production back above 25 litres per day.

"On our own farm we have worked very hard for the last 20 years to improve the herd's health status. Consequently our stock have always been very healthy, our veterinary costs have been very low compared with many other farms and the

cows have very high levels of immunity. Even though the herd is now officially free from a number of important diseases, including Johnes disease, BVD, leptospirosis and IBR, bluetongue created a lot of problems for us.

“Our own experience of the disease started in the autumn of 2007, very soon after neighbouring farms began having problems. Over 20 per cent of our cows had problems with their feet and difficulty walking, milk yields dropped from an average of 30 litres per day to 28 litres, cows were more difficult to get back in calf and our calving index slipped from 390 days to over 410 days. That wasn’t at all what we had planned, as our objective is to feed heifer calves well to get them growing quickly so that they are large enough to be artificially inseminated at 13 – 14 months and calve at 23 months, about a month less than the average in The Netherlands. However, because of bluetongue we were unable to achieve that.

“When the Dutch Government authorised vaccination against bluetongue in 2008, we didn’t have to think twice about it. We started vaccinating in May that year, with very good results which were typical of those I saw on other farms across the very wide area. No-one that I know of who vaccinated had any problems with bluetongue or any issues resulting from vaccination.

“I believe that we got off very lightly compared with many other farms in this region. Milk production has since stabilised and our calving index has improved, but the disease still cost us between €10,000 and €15,000. We plan to expand our herd considerably, to about 200 cows, but would not even consider that investment were we not able to vaccinate against bluetongue.

“Farmers in The Netherlands will have to pay for the vaccine this year, but the price is very low compared with the potential cost of the disease and any producer who has experienced the benefits of vaccination will regard it as cheap insurance. My consultancy work involves giving talks to groups of farmers throughout the country and consequently I knew that many in the North thought that the disease would be confined to the South and not reach them. Even though the Dutch Government paid for the vaccine last year, they chose not to vaccinate and were left to count the cost.”