Fairfield House
Veterinary Surgery

Beef News

Spring 2023

Waterproofs are a permanent fixture

now, after the beautiful February weather lulled us into a false sense of security. When I started writing this newsletter a month ago (before the carnage of spring really kicked off), more than one farmer has remarked that "we could do with a bit of rain." I blame them entirely for all this mud.

TB tests are a certainly a lot easier with dry, intact paperwork and clippers that aren't clogged. We have a lot of testing coming up this Spring, so please get booked in early, especially for your whole herd tests! TB is an ongoing worry for all UK farmers, but particularly those in the highest risk areas. We are all familiar with the nerves that "reading day" bring, knowing the impact that a major TB breakdown would have on the herd and business. The wider public are slowly opening their eyes too, with massive thanks to Mr Clarkson for portraying modern farming so honestly.

We are relatively lucky that TB is not currently widespread here in East Sussex, and it is entirely down to us to keep it that way. TB is not inevitable - every farmer has a responsibility to keep his or her own herd safe, but also their friends' and neighbours' herds. Safe purchasing practices and minimising contact with badgers are both absolutely paramount to keeping East Sussex TB free. We will continue to test carefully and thoroughly, to ensure that the few outbreaks we see are nipped in the bud early, meaning farms can be re-opened with the minimal possible impact. We are all in this together.

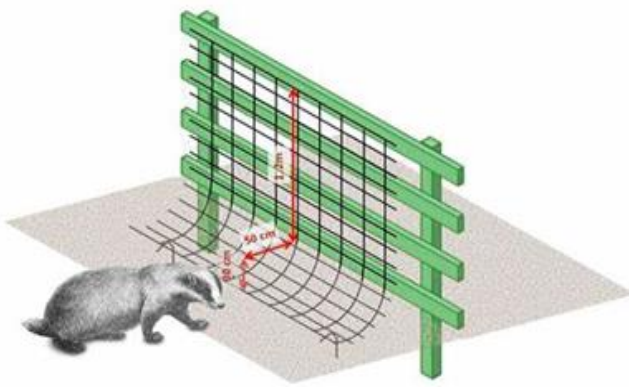
Thank you for your ongoing support!

Team Farm

Fortifying your Farm

When figuring out how to keep TB out of your farm, it can be helpful to consider your farmyard as a castle, your pasture as your battlefield, and TB-infected animals as your enemy. The "big guns" are TB infected cattle and badgers, however it could be dangerous to ignore deer and other wildlife.

We need to figure out where the weaknesses lie in your defence – could the Trojan horse be inadvertently welcomed in? Is the enemy lurking in setts around your battlefield? We need to work out how to fortify the castle, maintain a ceasefire on the battlefield, and prevent the enemy from learning about your resources.



1) The Trojan Horse = bought in cattle

Low risk strategy:

Many farms successfully maintain completely closed herds, by breeding their own replacements, including bulls by artificial insemination (AI).
A less extreme version of this is to keep the herd mainly closed, only bringing in the occasional young bull, who has been pre-movement TB tested, and comes straight from his farm of birth. Check the ibTB website map to see if the farm of origin and surrounding farms have any recent TB history.

High risk strategy:

Buying large numbers of cattle, from multiple or unknown sources (e.g. via markets), and buying from the High Risk Area (HRA), significantly increases your chances of buying in TB. Older cattle are also riskier, as they are more likely to have come into contact with TB than calves. Buying *untested* cattle from the Low Risk Area (LRA) is also a dangerous strategy. These counties are not free of TB, they just have a lower incidence. These cattle may have been moved from farm to farm, picking up disease and carrying it along, without ever being tested. A good breeder should be happy to prove their animals are clean with a private pre-movement TB test, alongside blood screening for other infectious diseases.

2) The Battlefield Enemy = infected wildlife

Unfortunately, we now know that a significant proportion of badgers in East Sussex are infected with TB. Badgers spread TB to cattle by indirect contact - by shedding bacteria in their saliva, urine and faeces, then cattle ingesting these bacteria. This could result from licking the same lick buckets, cattle grazing around latrines and setts, sharing water troughs, or from badgers toileting on forage or areas where cattle are fed.

As we are all too aware, badgers are a protected species. You cannot legally cull them unless you are in a licenced area – East Sussex is not.

This does not mean we are entirely helpless however – there are many strategies you can employ to avoid badgers getting too close to your cattle.

Low Risk Strategy:

It is a good idea to walk around each field before your cattle get turned out and look for evidence of setts or latrines. These areas can be fenced off with a single strand of electric wire, to avoid cattle eating grass that has been urinated or defaecated on by badgers. You can cut the long grass later to make forage as the drying and/or fermentation process will kill the bacteria.

Badger faeces found in a grazing field

A badger run coming from a sett in the woods, into a grazing field. Badgers are creatures of habit and generally follow the same paths.

If your cattle are not co-grazing with sheep, raise the water troughs to over 1m high, for example by putting a couple of breeze blocks underneath. If you cannot raise them, consider lowering the water level. This will prevent badgers from being able to put their noses in the water.

Badgers adore lick buckets and will happily venture into sheds for a taste of these delights. The licks can become highly contaminated with TB bacteria that are shed in the badgers' saliva.

Every cow that then licks the bucket is at enormous risk of infection. By replacing lick buckets with trace element boluses, or in-water supplements, you can effectively mitigate this risk.

Typical badger holes with flat bottoms and curved tops, found in woodland. The entrances are kept clear of foliage, so they are clearly active.

If some of your fields are teeming with badgers, could these become your silage fields, instead of having cattle grazing them? If this is not possible, try to reserve these fields for finishing animals only, as they will not have to pass any TB tests to go to the abattoir.

High Risk strategy:

Badgers will eat absolutely anything, but have a particular penchant for starchy food. Feeding forage or concentrate from the ground out in the field is enormously risky. Badgers will happily help themselves to the buffet you have provided, bringing along their TB bacteria rather than a nice bottle of wine. If you have to feed out in the field, put bales in a ring feeder with at least 1m of solid sheeting at the base.

Concentrate feed needs to go in raised troughs. A few missed cattle nuts hidden among the grass each day is a perfect way to attract badgers into the area. They then settle down, start a family and pay no attention to eviction notices.

What about deer? Deer are known to carry bovine TB and are capable of spreading it, however they do not pose such a high risk as badgers. This is partially due to the fact they shed a lower concentration of bacteria in bodily fluids than badgers do, and partially due to behavioural differences. Where badgers have no concerns about sneaking into your sheds to feed, deer would rather keep their distance. At grazing, badgers use the same tracks and latrines day-to-day, resulting in greater contamination of that ground, whereas deer are less habitual. However, if you do have a very large population of deer on your farm, using the same fields on a regular basis, it may be worth having a chat with some local stalkers.

There are so many different factors that can influence the TB risk of individual farms, it can be difficult to see the wood for the trees. We offer free TB Advisory Service visits for all our beef, dairy and alpaca clients. During this visit, we will discuss your specific farm risks, have a walk around your farm buildings and fields, and create a personalised plan to help mitigate your TB risk. This might include recommendations as simple as boarding up a gap in the wall of your cattle yard, or bigger projects such as changing buying strategies. Nothing will be put in writing without your agreement. We will drop in again 3-6 months later to see how you are getting on. There is absolutely no charge for these visits and the feedback from farmers so far has been very positive. If you would like to book a TBAS visit, please call in and speak to Kate.

TBAS
TB ADVISORY SERVICE

Schmallenberg this Spring

Between February and April this year, we have seen a number of neonatal calves born with deformities. All the calves were born alive and appeared bright and well in themselves, and the deformities were mild in the majority of cases. Some farms experienced more than one case.

The deformities seen include:

- Flexoral deformities of the forelimbs (see Figure)
- Twisted jaw (see Figure 2)
- Rotated spine/pelvis
- Laxity in hips, stifles and fetlocks – often only affecting one side (see Figure 2)

Initially, we were quite perplexed as to the cause of these deformities. Schmallenberg virus (SBV) was considered, though classically this would manifest as mangled dead foetuses with fixed joints – nothing like the bouncy babies we were examining. A conversation with the pathologists at our regular lab also suggested SBV was very unlikely.

We explored various other options, such as BVD, manganese deficiencies and genetic deformities, however none of these fitted the bill either. In the end, one of our very amenable farmers allowed me to test one of the dams for SBV antibodies, just on the off-chance – and it came back positive. Since then, I have been back to a few farms to test other dams of deformed calves, and all of them have come back positive.

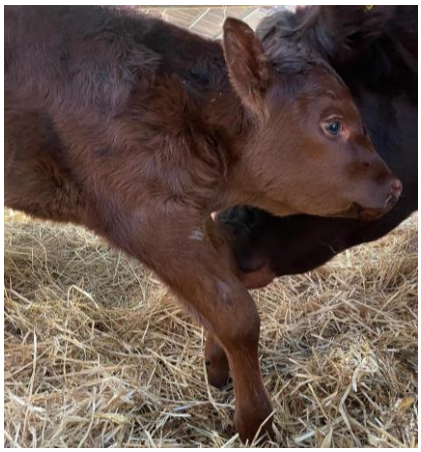


Figure 1: Flexural deformity of forelimbs

It is interesting to note that all the cases that were reported to us involved calves of the Sussex breed.

This could indicate a genetic pre-disposition, though there has been no relevant research done to support this theory. It could simply be because there are a lot of Sussex calves in Sussex!

Figure 2: Twisted jaw and laxity in hind limb – corrected with splint

We are pleased to report than the vast majority of affected calves are thriving. Those limbs with flexural deformities have straightened out after a few weeks of toddling around, some with the aid of splints, others without any help. The twisted jaws aren't affecting their ability to feed and the lax joints are strengthening up.

How is Schmallenberg transmitted?

Cattle catch Schmallenberg by being bitten by infected midges, usually during the summer months. If they are pregnant when they are infected, the virus is transmitted through the uterus to the calf.

What does Schmallenberg look like normally?

When initially infected, adult cattle may show mild signs of malaise – fever, inappetence, milk drop, sometimes diarrhoea – however these signs are often unnoticeable. The main effect is seen in the unborn foetus when pregnant cows are infected:

- Still births
- Arthrogryposis (abnormal joints)
- Hydrocephaly (build-up of fluid in skull)
- Brachygnathia inferior (overshot jaw)
- Ankylosis (stiff joints)
- Torticollis (twisted neck)
- Scoliosis (deformed spine)

What does it mean for the breeding future of the cow?

Adult cows fight off the virus within a few weeks and develop a good level of immunity afterwards, which is thought to last for around 3-5 years. This means that the recovered cow is actually safer to breed

from than a cow that has never been infected. If the cow is tested for Schmallenberg antibodies during this time, the results will come back positive. The higher the antibody level, the more likely she was exposed recently, and the better her current level of immunity.

Can I keep the calf as a replacement heifer?

It is risky to keep heifer calves for breeding if they were born with deformities, even if they appear to be recovered. Imperfect joints are more likely to develop arthritis at a relatively early age, and joint issues could be exacerbated when the supporting ligaments relax around calving. Malformations of the pelvis may not be visible externally, but may affect the internal diameter and the ability of the heifer to calve naturally.

How can I prevent future cases?

Diseases transmitted by insects are notoriously hard to control. Trying to reduce exposure to midges is the mainstay of prevention:

- Regular application of insect repellents (e.g. Coopers Spot On, Flypor, Dysect) for pregnant cows during summer
- Avoiding pastures close to water courses
- Access to housing at dawn and dusk if possible

IN THE NEWS:

Tighter global beef trade boosts UK prices

Reduced US beef output and high domestic competition is helping to paint a bright future for UK beef prices. Despite many UK households feeling the pinch with the current cost of living issues, beef prices are touching £5/kg (up 14.4% compared to this time last year). Although cheaper mince products are being favoured, this ensures that cull cow prices also remain strong.

US beef production is predicted to be down by 6.5% this year, and global production down by 0.3%, despite Brazil and China being predicted to increase their production significantly. Cattle numbers in Europe were down by 2.1% last summer, to 27.6 million, while the UK has experienced a 4% increase in its own herd size.

This optimism is reflected further down the production line, with the price of 6-12 month old and 12-18 month old stores increasing by 19.5% and 13% respectively compared to this time last year.

Farm input costs have eased very slightly, though high feed prices are still meaning animals enter the abattoir leaner than before. As a result, abattoirs are having to remain competitive to get high enough numbers through.

Meanwhile, new research has shown that meat, fish and poultry dishes still make up the vast majority of restaurant and take-away meals. Vegetarian and plant-based meals account for only 15.1% of the market share, with no uplift recorded as a result of Veganuary.

Lead risk warning

Farmers are being warned to be vigilant to the risk that fly-tipped and discarded batteries can have on livestock. Lead poisoning is extremely harmful, often fatal, and young livestock are particularly susceptible due to their inquisitive nature. Most cases are seen when cattle are turned out for the first time in Spring.

When ingested in small amounts, lead can cause slow or stunted growth, blindness, infertility and neonatal deformities. In larger amounts, it is directly fatal. Signs to look out for are loss of sight, wobbliness, tooth grinding and bloat.

During the year 2021-2022, local authorities in England dealt with 1.09 million fly-tipping incidents.