

# BVD a threat in closed herds

One Devon farmer has discovered that routine monitoring, rather than assumptions about herd health, is crucial, following an unexpected diagnosis of bovine viral diarrhoea in his closed herd. British Dairying finds out more.

Running a closed herd and prioritising biosecurity is not always enough to prevent bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) entering the herd. So one Devon-based pedigree Holstein herd has discovered. Fortunately, routine youngstock screening detected the issue early, allowing swift action to be taken.

The 190-cow milking herd at Aller Farm, Stockland, near Honiton, produces an average of 10,000 litres/cow per year under an Arla Care contract, with regular health management central to the system.

"The farm had been a part of the BVDFree scheme, so proactive BVD screening and prevention was a routine part of its herd health plan," explains vet Tom Laycock at Blackdown Farm Vets.

"The June 2024 youngstock screening showed evidence of BVD antibodies, which was puzzling as vaccination has been in place for several years and the herd is closed. We decided to test again to coincide with the next TB test in September 2024 and, sure enough, there was another spike in the results. Immediately, we started a hunt for persistently infected (PI) stock, by blood testing every animal in the herd and looking for the BVD antigen, which indicates active infection."

Two PI calves aged four to five months old were identified and removed from the herd. Keen to protect the rest of the herd from further infection, Tom advised



Routine health visits uncovered BVD, prompting quick and effective action

swapping to Bovela, the live BVD vaccine, which offered a simple one-shot primary course and a flexible booster programme.

"For us, as an all-year-round calving herd, juggling the timing of boosters to ensure stock are protected prior to getting in-calf was hard work," explains farmer Nigel Parris. "It was probably a mis-timing issue around this that left some cows unprotected and allowed the BVD virus to get in. It's a very cattle-dense area around here and the virus was probably transmitted by nose-to-nose contact - even though we thought we had double-fenced our boundaries."

Nigel switched to a fortnightly vet visit from Tom seven years ago. "It's an odd one really; I thought my vet spend was high so wanted to reduce it. Increasing the amount of time Tom spends with us has meant reduced spend on medicines, as we now focus much more on vaccination and preventative health management."

In addition to BVD vaccination, the herd is vaccinated against leptospirosis and undergoes a quarterly bulk milk screen for

infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR). Being in a TB area, the family have found themselves keeping beef-cross calves due to movement restrictions, although the herd did test clear of TB in April 2025.

Heifers are inseminated with sexed semen twice before running with the Angus bull if they don't hold. Age at first calving is 26 months, and Nigel is satisfied with the 394-day calving interval. Adult cows are also mostly served to sexed semen, with sire selection focusing on chest width, udder conformation, legs and feet, and milk constituents, while avoiding further increases in cow size.

Careful calf management from the four-strong farm team means that robust baby calves grow into healthy youngstock and productive adult milking cows. Each calf receives at least eight litres of colostrum from its own dam (unless they have tested positive for Johnes) within a 12-hour period, before moving onto pasteurised transition milk. The calves are initially housed in groups of four to six and then moved to larger groups in hutches.

Group housing is a requirement of the Arla Care contract, and Nigel believes it benefits calf wellbeing. The contract also requires milking cows to graze for a minimum of 100 days. To achieve this, the high yielding group graze overnight throughout the summer, while the low yielders, dry cows and heifers are out for as long as conditions allow between April and October.

The 162-ha farm is predominantly grassland, alongside wheat which is combined and rolled for inclusion in the total mixed ration (TMR). "We are finding growing maize increasingly challenging, and will probably grow more wheat in the future," says Nigel. "If we need more maize, we will just buy it in. The 2025 growing season was a challenge from both a weather and growth perspective."

"We usually take five cuts from the ryegrass paddocks, clamping the first two and baling the rest. This year we took four cuts and the last one was early November, the latest ever that I can recall."

Reflecting on the recent BVD challenge, Nigel is grateful that the presence of the virus was picked up rapidly, thanks to routine youngstock screening. "We took Tom's advice and started vaccinating as soon as possible. Looking back, I realise how much better a one-shot primary course and flexible booster regime works for us. I like simplicity, and this has made a huge difference to cattle handling needs. We also won't have any unprotected animals at risk of being infected by BVD should there be any in our proximity."

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## Farm facts

- 162ha farm
- 190 pedigree Holstein milking cows
- Average yield 10,000 litres/cow
- Arla Care contract
- BVD virus picked up in routine youngstock screen
- PI hunt identified two four to five-month-old PI calves
- Switched vaccination for ease of management and simplicity