

Statement from AHWNI Chief Executive Dr Sam Strain

The need to tackle endemic diseases of livestock in Northern Ireland has only increased. Increasing pressures have led to a critical need to reduce and, wherever possible, eradicate major diseases of livestock. Challenges include ever tighter margins, the need to reduce antibiotics in agriculture and the mitigation of farm associated greenhouse gas emissions. Together these challenges mean there has probably never been a greater urgency to control disease. There's now a pressing need to convert warm words to tangible support in tackling endemic disease in cattle. To achieve the goal of becoming the international benchmark for high animal health status in cattle will require a step change from the current level of commitment and funding.

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With the statement by the current President of the NFU to make agriculture in England and Wales carbon neutral by 2040 and the UFU expressing its commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions the industry must now look at ways that it can ameliorate GHG emissions with the support of government. It is very well recognised that reducing disease leads to a substantial reduction in GHG emissions per unit of agricultural output. The 'Reducing UK Emissions 2018 Progress Report to Parliament,' stated that 'Proposals set out in the Clean Growth Strategy regarding ... tackling endemic cattle diseases should be turned into firm policies.' This report identified improved animal health as an important GHG abatement measure that government and industry must include in any strategy to ameliorate agriculture associated GHG emissions. While the improvement of farm profitability remains an important driver for reducing disease burden, there is now an overwhelming 'public good' driver for reducing disease in livestock.

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Resistance to antimicrobials is a clear and present danger to public and animal health. Margaret Chan, the former director-general of the World Health Organization, said that, 'antimicrobial resistance is a global crisis—a slow motion tsunami. The situation is bad and getting worse.' The O'Neill report estimated that if resistance continued to increase at its current rate, we might expect 10 million deaths from resistant related infections globally every year by 2050. Fundamentally, the development of resistance is driven by the use of antimicrobials. Any reduction in their use will inevitably slow the development of resistance. Much of the antibiotics currently used on farm are driven by a relatively small number of endemic infections that can either be eradicated, such as BVD and IBR, or substantially controlled, such as Johne's Disease or Digital Dermatitis. The ongoing reduction of on-farm antimicrobial use starts with reducing the drivers of antimicrobial use, endemic disease. To get serious on reducing antimicrobial use will require us to get serious on reducing endemic disease.

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Infections have historically been approached through the development of control programmes targeting individual diseases. This has proven successful in some cases such as Aujesky's Disease in pigs and is proving successful with BVD in cattle. However, there is good evidence that a new approach is needed. Many of the infectious conditions we face on farms have common factors. Approaches to controlling one aspect of one infection may well help with controlling other aspects of other conditions. For example, we know that almost all infections typically spread between countries, regions and farms through the movement of animals. A key factor in reducing Johne's Disease is through the improvement of the hygiene conditions at calving and calf rearing. These changes will also limit other calving diseases such as calf scour, thereby reducing antimicrobial use. There is therefore an urgent need to re-think approaches to disease control – by joining the dots between the diseases and providing properly resourced bespoke advice to farmers on how to reduce infection risk across the range of infections facing the NI industry. Current approaches to biosecurity and biosecurity advice are not fit for purpose and contribute very little to infection control.

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The Northern Ireland Agri-Food industry made the prescient decision a number of years ago to develop a not-for profit company tasked with delivering animal health control to the NI cattle industry, AHWNI. Proof that this approach was appropriate and has been successful can be seen in the halving of BVD within N. Ireland. This is a remarkable achievement given the exceptionally limited resource AHWNI has. It is probably unprecedented that a regional control programme is successfully delivering disease control with only 3.5 full-time equivalent members of staff. So much more could be done and should be done. Endemic diseases such as Johne's Disease, IBR, cattle lameness not to mention the enormous drain that bovine TB is together with GHG emissions and the need for further reductions in antimicrobial use make the need for properly resourced, industry led, joined-up, endemic disease control more urgent than ever. There is a need for both industry and government to grasp the opportunity to develop a properly world leading approach to disease control – to raise NI animal health status to an internationally recognised world beating level. Geographical size and location already give us an advantage, but to achieve it will require proper resourcing. Penny pinching here or there will not achieve the goal. The challenge to all of us in the industry is are we up for doing this – to make our industry the socially responsible, high health, world leading industry it needs to be to be sustainable and to thrive? To do it will require a step change in resourcing. If this doesn't happen, we will have failed to grasp the opportunity to transform our industry at just the time it needs all the help it can get.

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