

The importance of dealing with abortions in cattle

Farmers are being advised to show vigilance for abortions in their cattle herds, particularly as this is the peak abortion season for spring calving herds, and because abortions may indicate serious health issues in the wider herd and could lead to significant financial losses. Vets from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and Animal Health and Welfare NI (AHWNI) are recommending that when an abortion or premature birth occurs, it is important to take action to identify the cause, so that preventative measures can be put in place.

The diagnostic rate of infectious diseases in cases of abortion is low (approximately 33%), however this does not mean that only one third of abortions have an infectious cause. As the interval between infection of the dam and the abortion occurring can be weeks, it may not be possible to detect the infecting organism in material submitted to the laboratory.

Not all abortions are caused by infections, but it is wise to assume that the cause is infectious when dealing with an animal that has aborted, and so the situation should be managed accordingly:

- Identify the aborted cow – if not visually obvious, ask your vet to examine the group of cows to identify the one that has aborted and to take samples for testing from her.
- Wear protective clothing when handling aborted material.
- Ensure that no animals (especially dogs and foxes) have access to cleanings.
- Follow the legal requirements for notification and testing following an abortion. Remember that all abortions, stillbirths and calves which die soon after birth must be notified to DAERA so that Department staff can blood sample the cow or heifer to rule out Brucellosis. All dead fetuses (including abortions, premature births and stillbirths) must be tissue tag tested for BVD virus. This is important, as abortion can be the first indication of a BVD problem in a herd and the quicker this is picked up the more likely it is that measures can be put in place to reduce further losses.
- Remove the aborted material (foetus and cleaning): place in a strong plastic bag, tie it (eg using cable ties), then place it in a second strong bag and tie it again. Speak to your vet and then bring it to the laboratory for testing or dispose of it appropriately through the fallen stock scheme.
- Isolate the aborting cow immediately, especially from other pregnant cattle, for at least 3 weeks and until vaginal discharges have ceased and laboratory results are received.
- Clean and disinfect the area where the abortion occurred.
- Decide with your vet whether to cull or retain the cow which has aborted and what to address in your herd health plan in light of results.
- Closely monitor other pregnant cows – inspect pregnant cow groups at least once a day and isolate any cows showing signs of imminent abortion.

Note for editors:

1. AHWNI is responsible for the delivery of the Northern Ireland Bovine Viral Diarrhoea Eradication Scheme. For more information on the operation of the Scheme, please contact AHWNI (email info@animalhealthni.com, tel. 028 7963 9333) or visit the AHWNI website www.animalhealthni.com.