



nantwich
farm vets LTD

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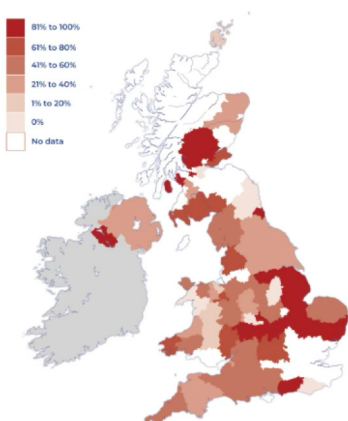
Forage Ahead!

We've finally got some long-awaited wet stuff from the skies! Although that prolonged spell of summer heat may be over, the knock-on effects will be much longer lasting, both direct effects on the cows (see Rob's article later...) and indirectly on forage stocks for later in the year. Although grass will hopefully recover sufficiently to provide a cut in a few weeks, it likely won't be of tremendous quality. Take time to work out exactly how much forage you have available, not just total volume but testing it for dry matter and quality. Consider the needs of the whole herd, including youngstock and dry cows, and allow for storage and feeding losses. If stocks are looking tight, the sooner you know, the more options you have. Forage ahead now, rather than forage short later!

Q Fever

You may have seen Q fever in the press recently. It's not because it's a new or exotic disease – it has been known about for years. However, we now understand more about how it spreads, and there is a vaccine available to help control it.

Q fever is caused by a bacteria (*Coxiella burnetii* if you're into fancy names) that can affect cattle, sheep and goats. When I was at university it was thought to only be spread by ticks. We now know it is also transmitted by inhalation and ingestion, and the bacteria can be carried in dust and aerosols and spread considerable distances. It is shed in calving and lambing fluids, vaginal discharge and muck. Recent studies have shown a higher prevalence around the country than was once thought (see map below).



What are the signs?

In cattle, Q fever is mainly associated with poor fertility and embryonic loss. It can also cause abortions, stillbirths, weak calves, retained cleansings and metritis.

In sheep and goats, abortion is the main problem.



Q fever can also infect people, usually through inhaling contaminated dust or aerosols, where it can cause flu-like illness and, more rarely, liver, heart or reproductive problems.

How do we diagnose it?

Diagnosis can be difficult because many other diseases can cause similar problems, and infected animals may show no obvious signs.

A bulk milk test is often a useful starting point in dairy herds. If this is positive, further testing can help confirm whether Q fever is contributing to the problem. If Q fever is suspected, remember to request it specifically, as it is not always included in routine abortion investigations.

Could vaccination help?

Where herds have grumbling fertility problems or unexplained embryonic loss, Q fever is worth considering as part of the investigation. Vaccination can be an effective control measure, although the cost needs to be weighed against the potential benefits.

If you have ongoing poor fertility, abortions or unexplained reproductive problems, speak to us about whether Q fever could be involved and whether testing or vaccination is appropriate.



Hot Cows, Hidden Costs

After the fifth heatwave this year, heat stress seems to be getting the blame for everything now, including my grumpiness! *[No one's going to believe that one, Rob! – Ed.]*

So, I decided to delve into the current and future impacts of heat stress, what actually causes them, and why we may need to take the issue increasingly seriously.

We all know heat stress occurs when an animal cannot dissipate enough body heat to maintain its normal body temperature. It is influenced not only by air temperature, but also by humidity, solar radiation, wind speed, water availability, coat or wool, age, breed and production level.

High-producing dairy cows are particularly vulnerable because they generate large amounts of metabolic heat. With climate change expected to bring more frequent, intense and prolonged periods of hot weather, heat stress is likely to become an increasingly important issue for all ruminants – particularly dairy cows.



Lower milk yield and quality

The most obvious effect of heat stress is reduced milk production, largely due to reduced dry matter intake and changes in metabolism. Cows eat less because digestion and rumen fermentation generate heat, helping them reduce their own metabolic heat production.

Heat stress also alters glucose metabolism. Increased insulin activity means more glucose is used by the cow's tissues, leaving less available for lactose and milk production. Normally, cows in negative energy balance mobilise body fat, but this is also suppressed during heat stress. On some farms, we have seen milk yields drop by 4–12 litres per cow during the late June heatwave.

Milk fat and protein can also fall as heat stress alters rumen function, volatile fatty acid production and nutrient partitioning. We have certainly seen this on farms during June and July, although levels are now recovering.

The key point is that heat stress is **not simply a nutritional energy deficiency caused by cows eating less**. There are complex metabolic changes taking place, which helps explain why cows can take time to recover after temperatures return to normal.



Reduced fertility

Heat stress can reduce conception rates, impair ovarian function and increase early embryonic loss. We have certainly seen dips in conception and heat



detection rates, resulting in reduced pregnancy rates.

One of the frustrating things about heat stress and fertility is that the effects can continue **long after the hot weather has gone**. The consequences of a heatwave in June may still be showing up in fertility figures several weeks or months later.

We have also seen an increase in premature calvings, stillbirths, abortions and weak calves. Heat stress can affect the dam's metabolism, hormonal regulation and blood flow to the uterus, potentially affecting both calving and the developing calf.

Calves carried by heat-stressed cows can have lower birthweights, reduced vigour and poorer growth after birth. There is also evidence that the effects can last much longer. A particularly interesting study found that heifer calves exposed to heat stress in the womb subsequently produced less milk when they entered the milking herd around two years later.



Greater disease susceptibility

Heat stress can **suppress immune function**, potentially leaving cows more susceptible to disease. We have certainly seen flare-ups in mastitis cases and increases in somatic cell counts on a number of farms.

We are also beginning to see an increase in lameness following the first bouts of heat stress. I'd imagine increased standing times are likely to be a contributing factor to this.



Reduced growth and body condition

Reduced feed intake combined with changes in metabolism can lead to poorer body condition and reduced growth, particularly in high-producing animals.

Amino acids may be diverted towards glucose production, while cows are less able to mobilise body fat. This can contribute to loss of body condition and reduced production during and after heat stress.



Higher water requirements

This could potentially be **one of the biggest challenges of all in the future**. Water requirements increase significantly during hot weather, putting additional pressure on supplies. This year, we have already seen problems with boreholes and wells drying up.

It is not enough simply to have water available – cows need sufficient quantities of clean, accessible water, particularly immediately after milking when large numbers may want to drink at the same time.



Higher mortality risk

Severe or prolonged heatwaves can result in direct deaths from heat stress. Thankfully, the number of cattle we know to have died directly from heat stress this year has been relatively low.

However, we have seen significant numbers of cows that have failed to respond to other diseases or disorders following heat stress when, under normal circumstances, we would have expected them to recover. The indirect effects of heat stress may therefore be considerably greater than the number of animals that actually die from heat itself.



Economic losses

Ultimately, all of the above has an economic cost.

Lost milk production, poorer milk constituents, reduced fertility, increased disease, poorer calf performance, reduced growth, increased mortality and higher water requirements all add up.

And this is where the future concern lies.

ONE PROBLEM, DIFFERENT SPECIES

Dairy cattle are generally the most economically sensitive to heat stress, particularly high-yielding cows, because milk production generates substantial metabolic heat.

Beef cattle can also suffer significant losses through reduced growth rates, poorer fertility and increased mortality during extreme heat.

Sheep and goats generally have greater natural heat tolerance, but they are certainly not heat-proof. Prolonged heat combined with dehydration, poor nutrition or lack of shade can still result in significant production and reproductive losses.

Importantly, the effects of heat stress can be cumulative. Repeated heatwaves may mean animals spend less time within their optimal physiological range, so losses can occur even when individual heat events are not severe enough to cause obvious illness or death.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Heat stress affects livestock at three levels: animal welfare and health, production and reproduction, and ultimately farm economics.

The future risk is not simply that more animals will die during extreme heatwaves. It is the accumulation of smaller losses in milk, meat, growth, fertility and survival across increasingly frequent periods of hot weather.

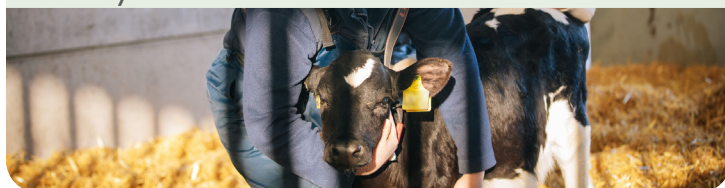
Finding effective ways to minimise these cumulative effects of heat stress and ensuring sufficient water provision is going to be key for facing the climate challenges and changes in the future.

Dates for your diary

Friday 11th September

Advanced Calf Rearing Course - ONE SPACE LEFT!

A one-day course of both theory and practical sessions that will take your calf rearing knowledge to the next level, and equip you with key skills and practical solutions to take back to your farm. £115 + VAT.



Wed 23rd Sept - Wed 4th Nov, 10am-12pm

New Herdpersons Course - FULL!

A comprehensive introduction to all the key areas of modern dairy farming — ideal for anyone new to the industry or those wanting to refresh their skills and knowledge. Delivered in seven bite-sized modules each Wednesday. £350 for the full course or £60 per module.

This course is full but do contact the office to register your interest for the next one.

Monday 28th September

NFV Client Golf Day, Wychwood Park

Places still available!

Monday 28th September, from 11:30am
Wychwood Park Golf Club, Weston, Crewe

~ £80pp ~

Bacon bap ~ 18 holes ~ 2-course meal + prizes

Prizes awarded for highest individual and 2-person team score, closest-to-pin and longest drive.

Book as a team or as an individual (you'll be randomly paired up).

Contact NFV on 01270 610349 or office@nantwichfarmvets.co.uk
Full payment required to reserve a place.

Thurs 26th February, 10:30am - 1pm

Medicines Course

Farmers assured through Red Tractor need to update on one of these courses (or similar) every five years, so these courses are very popular. £70+VAT. Includes a hot lunch!



Get in touch...



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