



TB or not TB?

After an apparent decline in the first four months of 2006, the trend in the number of new outbreaks of bovine tuberculosis in cattle herds reverted to type this summer, with a 13% increase between May and September, as compared with the same period of 2005... The September figure of 268 outbreaks was the highest for that month in modern times. Paul Rose shares further details.

In 2005, three thousand six hundred and fifty three 'incidents' of Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) were recorded in cattle; an increase of 9.1% on 2004. These cases involved the slaughter of nearly twenty-six thousand animals. Optimism expressed by the government at a much-trumpeted drop in numbers earlier this year was quickly dashed by the latest figures, which show another surge in numbers.

Camelids, of course, are not bovines – so should alpaca owners be concerned?

Bovine TB does not affect only bovines; it can affect all mammals and camelids too can and sometimes do catch this pernicious disease. There have been a number of cases reported in camelids both worldwide and more specifically, here in the UK.

Some animal species are more resistant than others and some veterinary output suggests that camelids are quite resistant and do not spread the disease among themselves. But close examination of the evidence suggests the basis for this optimistic assertion is somewhat thin and gleaned from situations where the level of bTB has not presented too serious problem even among cattle.

As the statistics above illustrate, however, bTB in the UK is a serious problem. Whilst some areas of the country (especially in the East of England) are mercifully still clear of the disease, it is raging in others. And when camelids come in contact with infected bovines or, more likely, when infected wildlife shares or traverses camelid grazing, they are in danger of contracting the disease. Given the difficulty of detecting bTB in its early stages and its ability to spread, it has received all too little attention among alpaca and llama owners.

Until February of this year, it was not obligatory to report suspected cases of bTB in camelids and as a result vets believe that many incidents have gone unrecorded and unmonitored.

The unfortunate consequence is that very little data has been gathered, the opportunity to learn and do more to combat the disease has been wasted, and it is not really known to what extent the disease is living, undetected, in apparently healthy herds.

Over the past couple of years cases have been reported in alpaca herds and, most recently, in a llama herd; cases ranging from single animals to quite substantial outbreaks. The llama herd in question is mine, so I speak with intense personal experience when stating that bTB is a most appalling malady to witness and one from which we need to make every effort to protect the national camelid herd.

Unfortunately, with vaccination not yet a viable option, and probably a decade away from becoming one, the only way to stop the spread of the disease is to identify and eliminate (or possibly in some circumstances, permanently isolate) the affected camelid and, vitally, to eradicate the source of the infection.

Eradication, however, is not quite as simple as it might sound. While bovine herds are tested on a regular basis, movement off farm requires prior pre-movement testing, and thousands of cattle continue to be slaughtered, there is still no policy or concerted action to remove the reservoir of disease from wildlife – especially from the badger population. Furthermore, it is illegal to take any action against badgers, or their setts.

The role of the badger in spreading bTB has been the centre of major controversy between farmer and the 'badger lobby'. The latter vociferously insist it is cattle that spread the disease to badgers whilst farmers consider the badger to be the perpetrator! Of course the debate is now irrelevant for the disease is now well established in both species and most, if not all, vets agree that the one-sided policy of slaughter of cattle and blanket protection of badgers has ensured only that the problem in cattle (etc) is perpetuated and that the build-up of the reservoir of disease in the badger population carries on unabated.

TB, or not TB? So how do you know if your alpacas are at risk?

TB in camelids is still a rare problem in the UK camelid population and it is statistically most unlikely that any of your alpacas are infected! But we need to take care to keep it that way.

Firstly, check with your local State Veterinary Service office (SVS is the veterinary arm of Defra) as to the extent of the problem in your area; some areas are disease-free, others are "hotspots".

Secondly, if there are cases reported in cattle in your area, and especially on a farm neighbouring your grazing, ensure your alpacas do not have nose-to-nose contact with them, do not share grazing with them and are not walked through the cattle fields.

Thirdly, if you are not in a disease-free area, check whether there are badger setts or badger runs across your land. If you are not able to ascertain this yourself then enrol the help of a local farmer or wildlife expert. If there are setts remember that it is illegal to interfere with them or disturb the badgers but you are allowed to fence off your alpacas from the setts, their runs and latrines (in theory at any rate!).

Signs of bTB

Animals can live with TB without showing any signs, and live to old age with it at that, perhaps ultimately dying from some quite unrelated problem. They can also have the disease, become clinically unwell and then apparently recover before you are aware of the nature of the problem. Much depends on which organs become affected.

The following signs *could* indicate bTB but please remember that they are all more likely to be the result of other totally unrelated conditions! If your camelids are showing any of these signs then of course, a vet should check them.

- Noticeable respiratory discomfort – flaring nostrils, heaving chest movement.
- Reluctance to run with the herd without stopping for rests.
- Chronic weight loss.
- Runny nose, coughing, spluttering, shaking of head, frequent guttural noises, dribbling.
- Lethargic slouchy posture, increased incumbency with floppy (rather than held back) ears.
- Loss of appetite, perhaps mouthing the ground rather than actually eating.
- Acute diarrhoea

It is most important, however, that the question is addressed – is it TB or is it not TB? For if ignored the opportunity for the disease to spread is greatly increased.

In the event of a death where the cause is not known, then I would advise most strongly that you have a post mortem conducted. Heart-stopping though it is, it is better to find out and

begin the fight to eliminate the disease if the result is positive – and be re-assured if it is negative!

Meanwhile the fight against TB, and the collection of meaningful data, in my own herd is ongoing. There are major unresolved issues concerning testing regimes, movement records, and absence of a protocol in law for dealing with the disease in “non-bovine” herds and for stopping its spread through inadequately tested movements. A full report will appear in a following issue of Alpaca World.

DEFRA Website Links

www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/tb/abouttb/otherspecies.htm#cam

www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/tb/index.htm