

Newsletter August 2011

We are holding a Lameness Workshop on 23rd August at Redhill, following on from our first lameness meeting back in April. We will cover cow tracks and cow comfort, with our guest speaker Nick Bell of the Royal Veterinary College. He is a world renowned speaker and should give us some very useful information to help us reduce the incidence of lameness in cattle.

We are holding our next BVD and Johne's course on 18th August at 11.30am. This is part 1 of the South West Healthy Livestock Initiative training programme that entitles you 70% funding towards risk assessment, diagnostics and a control plan. Please call the office to book your place for either meeting.

One of my frustrations at the moment as I drive around the county has been the alarming amount of Ragwort to be seen on verges and waste-land. So much so that it now seems to be present into fields as well. The weeds act 1959, empowers the secretary of state to serve notice requiring an occupier of land on which ragwort is growing to take action to prevent the weed from spreading. I can only assume that the minister hasn't been talking to her colleagues in the transport department! I urge you to call the Highways agency or local council to register your dissatisfaction regarding roadside and motorway control, failing that, you can download a form from the DEFRA website to forward to Natural England at, www.defra.gov.uk/forms/2011/03/30/weed2-complaint

Toxic pyrrolizidine alkaloids are present in all parts of ragwort. When ragwort is eaten, the toxins are absorbed from the gastro-intestinal tract and are released in the liver. They cause cell damage and inhibit the organ's normal repair and regeneration processes. Most animals will avoid eating the ragwort at pasture. However, if they are kept short of grass they may eat it or when preserved into hay or silage, it loses its bitter taste and will be eaten readily. Clinical signs will depend on the severity of the poisoning and can vary due to the many functions of the liver. Symptoms may include: loss of weight and condition; jaundice; photosensitive dermatitis; behavioural abnormalities; a staggering gait; impaired vision; abdominal pain and convulsions. However, because the liver can maintain its functions until two-thirds of the organ has been destroyed, symptoms of poisoning may not be apparent until as much as 75% of the liver has suffered damage. By the time signs of liver failure are evident, it is unlikely that it will be possible to save the animal. There are no simple tests currently available to specifically detect ragwort poisoning.

The other poisonous plant we often see in this area is Hemlock water dropwort, a member of the parsley family. The toxin found in this is a neurotoxin, the main effect of which is to cause convulsions. The first signs are often salivation and dilated pupils, followed rapidly by difficulty breathing, collapse and convulsions. Nearly all die rapidly; in the small percentage that don't, diarrhoea is a common clinical sign in the recovery phase. Confirmation of the cause of death is by identification of the plant in the rumen. Cattle are particularly at risk after ditches have been cleared out exposing the most poisonous part, the roots (often referred to as "dead man's fingers"). Identification of the plant above ground is not easy without a guide book as the plant resembles many non-poisonous parsleys, but the roots are distinctive. They are pale-yellow in colour consisting of five or more fleshy tubers which ooze a yellowish liquid from their cut surface. (These roots are poisonous for humans too, so it is essential to take care when handling the plant.)