

Cattle movement is key culprit in shifting bTB into 'clean areas'.

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THE only way bovine tuberculosis spreads into "clean" areas of the countryside is through cattle movement, farmers were told last week.

And just because a post mortem examination fails to show TB lesions that does not mean an animal was not infected.

These two harsh realities were delivered to the Farmers' Union of Wales annual meeting by Tony Edwards, director of the Welsh Assembly Government's animal health division, Animal Health Wales.

He is a leading player in the three-year WAG campaign to eradicate bTB in Wales by a range of measures, including a health check programme of testing every animal over 42 days old by the end of September and a pilot cull of badgers.

"There's only one way the disease gets into a clean area and that's by moving infected animals. It's all about cattle movement," said Mr Edwards.

He said bTB had gone "from bad to terrible" in the four years between his leaving Wales in 2005 and returning in February to take up his present post. More than 1,150 of the 13,500 cattle farms in Wales are now under bTB restrictions, and more cases were emerging through the health check programme.

By the end of May 9,300 farms had been tested, 2,600 of them on holdings that would otherwise not have been checked. Of these 2,600, 37 had cattle that reacted to the bTB skin test and another 204 were inconclusive re-actors, of which 94 had now gone clear while 25 had become reactors; 85 results were pending.

"There clearly was infection out there that the normal test pattern had not picked up - most are on the North Wales frontier in Clwyd," said Mr Edwards. The health check also picked up one outbreak on Anglesey.

"We are trying to think what we can do to keep the clean areas clean. We are working to hit this disease hard, and it's a real worry to me to see how this disease has grown since I left here in 2005." He frequently heard farmers say their cattle turned out to be uninfected because no lesions were found at post mortem. That was "rubbish".

"The reason that bacteria are so successful in surviving is that they pass on before you know you are infected. If you have a cold you are infectious for four days before you start sneezing." The skin test was "highly sensitive" and successful, with few false results, and if an animal is positive to a skin test it meant it was infected.

"All the post mortem will show is how far the disease has progressed in that animal.

But if the disease is found in an abattoir you can be sure that the disease has been around in

that herd for some time." Most farmers were co-operative and fewer than 10 did not see the need for testing.

"I have had to take equipment and staff onto two farms to enforce testing.

They were not commercial farmers but hobby farmers."