

The British government has set out a strategy to rid England of bovine TB in 25 years and the British Alpaca Society is in talks with DEFRA about introducing a voluntary bovine tuberculosis testing scheme for camelids.

This is all fine and dandy and may well help exports but is unlikely to counter the inexorable spread of the disease in cattle and wildlife to the east and north of England any time soon.

25 years is a very long time.

BIO SECURITY

Last year the counties of Cheshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, Hampshire and East Sussex joined the South West and Wales in being 12 month testing areas for cattle.

Breeders in the South West have heard our fellow alpaca breeders, colleagues from other areas, market against us resulting in incandescent outbursts from the breeders who have spent a great deal of time and money protecting their alpacas from wildlife and putting strict bio-security plans in place. One might ask them what they have done, how clean

their alpacas really are and perhaps inquire for whom in fact the bell tolls?

The development of a risk management plan for infectious diseases should be in the minds of all those wanting protection from diseases such as BVD, Johnes and bTB. It is only common sense to tackle the issues before they arrive and a farm or holding that has put such management methods in place must rank safer by a long way than those who just think they are safe, a dangerous strategy.

In this article three alpaca breeders, Popham Alpacas in Cornwall, Classical MileEnd Alpacas in Devon and Alpha Alpacas in Dorset explain how they have minimised the risk from infectious diseases for their herds.

SAFE AND SOUND

POPHAM ALPACAS

We've been breeding alpacas at Popham Alpacas in Cornwall for over ten years and like everyone we are still learning, but when the TB scare hit the headlines back in 2010, we took an immediate decision to invest a considerable amount of money to protect our stock. Our three nearby farms all run cattle and have been TB clear for some time but I felt I'd sleep easier at night knowing I'd taken the necessary steps to eliminate as much wildlife from Popham as possible.

We sought some quotes from contractors but soon realised that for the sort of money they were asking we could purchase the equipment, materials and do the job ourselves making sure at the same time that the job was done properly.

Purchasing the equipment was the fun bit, a post rammer for the back of the tractor, a "quick fencer" to help roll out the badger fencing which was a life saver as these rolls are about 80 kg each. I also looked at a mini-digger to dig the trenches which needed to go down two feet but I decided in the end to get a local contractor to do this bit.

So in the summer of 2010 the project began. Not without its pitfalls, I needed the help of a local farmer and his tractor on two occasions to pull me out of my own trench, but I learnt as I went and lost a few pounds around the waist in the process. In certain areas, for example where the garden is adjacent to the paddocks I have used electric fencing as the trenching would have been impossible in these areas. Some gateways are also protected by electric fencing. Spring 2011 saw the job completed. But was it working? So I invested in a night vision camera and placed it at strategic



points around the farm and to my delight we have had no breaches of our security since. It may not look as polished as a professional contractors job but I know it is working and I did it myself.

Obviously badger proof fencing doesn't make you bio-secure and we have taken further steps in eliminating breaches. We do not agist or have on farm matings. Any drive by matings are done outside of the normal animal areas in a restricted area with mobile pens which are re-located around the area. Other normal procedures like disinfection mats etc are in place.

When initially you embark on becoming bio-secure it at first seems quite daunting but it really is not difficult and you have a sense of satisfaction in knowing you are protecting your valuable stock.

I learnt as I went and lost a few pounds around the waist in the process!



PICTURES OF BADGER ACTIVITY FROM THE AWM ARCHIVE



A badger single latrine (left) and footprints (right)



A badger run



Evidence of a badger living in your barn



A badger sett

BRAVO ALPHA

DI DAVIES OF ALPHA ALPACAS IN DORSET WRITES:

Keeping your alpacas safe is an on-going challenge and one of the most frequently asked questions is – what about security? A recent visit from our local crime prevention officer suggested a number of measures we could introduce to protect our property and another tranche of security measures will soon be in place aimed at unwanted visitor who have only two legs. However, such visitors do not create the greatest threat to the Alpha Herd – it is wildlife.

We are based in West Dorset and three years ago we had our first visit from one of the 'big cats' which are known to roam this area. There have been so many sightings over the years that a book has been written about them. The results of this visit – a perfectly healthy female dead in the field with her hind quarters completely missing. The visits continued and a subsequent most unwelcome visit from a badger convinced us that if we were to keep the herd safe – we had to exclude wildlife from the site.

The farm is 15 acres, with the boundaries marked by old traditional mixed hedges. We have a main road on the western boundary, back from the road. Whilst our entire boundary was fenced, it was no barrier to wildlife and in addition to the unwanted visitors already mentioned we had the occasional visits from Roe and Sika deer, a number



of 'not so cunning foxes' fell victim to the alpacas when trying to cross our land and we had more than our fair share of rabbits.

All sorts of options were considered, some of which would have been very labour intensive to maintain, other would have offered protection from some but not all or what I by them had deemed to be 'the enemy' and the war had begun. Our chosen solution was not cheap - £20,000+, but this sum had to be set in context against the value of our herd. Two years ago we created 'Fort Alpha'.

A new perimeter fence was installed which is a combination of six foot chain link fencing which is dug in – two foot down and two foot out from the base of the fence line with the remaining two foot coming up out of the ground, to prevent badgers from trying to dig their way in. This is then linked to a six foot high anti deer/big cat fence which we set two foot in from the hedges. This allows us to cut the hedges and the gap is maintained by a combination of spraying and patrolling with a set of loppers. (Fig 1)

On top of the fence we have three strands of electric fencing to discourage anything from trying to climb or jump the fence. One of the added benefits of the 'big fence' has been that the two foot of double fencing at ground level has significantly reduced the number of rabbits we have on the farm – baby rabbits do come through the mesh but if they stay too long they become prisoners and subsequently sport for and victims

of the farm dogs.

The entry and the area around the house was identified as our potential weak spot – although wildlife is less likely to approach across the road. This area has been secured by all access gates being tinned and the areas beneath the gates have been dug out and filled with compacted hard core. (Fig 2)

Around the working pens we have solid post and rail fencing with stock fence on the inside, securely fixed to a solid base rail and where there is no base rail the bottom of the round fence is protected by three strands of electric wire. (Fig 3)

BE SEEN TO BE CLEAN

Turning now to bio security measures – 'Be seen to be clean'. Visitors to the farm are all invited to dip their boots and walk across disinfectant mats prior to entry. We have disinfectant mats which are deployed when vehicles cross the inner perimeter and all equipment is parked in an area which is not accessible to the alpacas. Pressure washing and disinfecting are regular pastimes to maintain our bio security.

Many will consider what we have done is extreme – but the security and health of the herd is paramount. There are all the sort of things that you can do to protect your herd – look out for the tell-tale signs of unwanted visitors – as a matter of routine lift your feeders off the ground or remove them once your alpacas have been fed. (Fig 4)



Fig 1



Fig 3



Fig 2



Fig 4



Perimeter fence



Fence skirt



Fenced gate

ONE STEP AHEAD

CLASSICAL MILEEND ALPACAS

AT Classical MileEnd Alpacas we take our farm and animal biosecurity very seriously, managing the risks from infectious and contagious diseases to secure a very low risk status for our alpacas.

Maintaining healthy alpacas requires not only good husbandry but also controls to ensure disease is not brought on to the farm from visitors, machinery or wildlife.

Our alpacas have no contact with any other farmed livestock so the major risk is from wildlife.

We decided to fence the entire perimeter of the farm, some 60 acres, with a small mesh, badger proof fence with a 300mm ground skirt. The fencing is expensive so we decided to do it ourselves buying a post hammer for the digger, a quick-fencer to go on the tractor and an awful lot of new fence posts. Although we considered electric fencing we came to the view that it was not appropriate with our very large Devon hedges and

the difficulty in keeping the grass away from the electric wires. The ground skirt, in the direction of the perceived threat, was made secure with foot long metal staples but today, nearly four years later, grass has completely covered the skirt and the staples. The tension on the fence and skirt is such that any animal would have to dig a big hole to get underneath and this would be clearly visible. So every day our stockman patrols the fence lines to make sure all is safe.

Gates on the perimeter can be a weakness. We laid railway sleepers underneath the gates with either welded mesh or the same fencing attached to the gate and meeting the sleepers.



Boarded gate

The next headache was how to feed all the animals off the ground. We used large guttering screwed on to wood that was then screwed on to the fence posts in the field and all the water troughs were raised off the ground.

Farm buildings can be a weakness too so it is vital that hay barns and feed stores are secure with close fitting metal doors and that any gates are secure.

We set up the farm so that there is an alpaca side and a general side. Visitors have to cross a

disinfection mat to get to the alpaca side and there is no vehicle access to the alpaca side from visitor vehicles and no outside contractors are used on farm. Our stockman has to change his footwear on arrival.

Like many other breeders we stopped having females on farm for agistment or matings but still do drive-by matings in pens with concrete floors that can be washed down with disinfectant. We have a number of quarantine paddocks for jointly owned males.

Our local veterinary practice have been very proactive in helping us and other farmers get their bio-security right with the help of the 'My Healthy Herd' computer programme. Some of this is not relevant to alpacas but it does flag up any obvious shortcomings in one's management, so a very useful tool. 🌐



Disinfectant mat



Feeding station on an internal fence



Water troughs raised off the ground



Water trough on an internal fence raised off the ground



Feeding station