

Cattle vet Ed Hewitt from the Ayrshire-based Armour Vet Centre, which is part of the XL Vet Group, takes a timely look at health and welfare issues that impact on dairy herds across the UK. In this issue he tells us what there is to know, so far, about a new virus that could pose a threat to UK herd health.

Don't panic, just keep a close watch over imported stock and their calves

Virus threatens fertility

Reports of a new virus that affects cattle are not a signal to panic, but producers – particularly those who have recently imported stock from The Netherlands or Germany – should keep a watchful eye for symptoms.

Since the summer, both the Netherlands and Germany have reported outbreaks of Schmallenberg virus – a vector-borne disease in cattle and sheep, with clinical signs such as fever, reduced milk yield (up to 50%), loss of appetite and condition and, in some cases, diarrhoea.

More than 160 beef and dairy herds were affected in The Netherlands and although the cattle recovered in a matter of days, there have now been reports of foetal abnormalities and spontaneous abortion. So its impact on fertility and milk yield are the big worry here.

The virus was isolated in a UK lab in late January and, as CowManagement went to press, the disease had also been confirmed in four sheep flocks in eastern England – in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex.

Producers need to be aware of calves born between summer 2011 and now and report any abortions and deformities. This is not a notifiable disease in the UK. But producers should be vigilant and inform their vet if they think they see Schmallenberg virus symptoms. Stillbirths, malformations or nervous disease in newborn calves or foetuses, born to imported animals, should be sent for screening to the AHVLA.



The encyclopaedia **Schmallenberg virus**

Cause

The cause is thought to be a vector-borne virus, spread by biting flies and midges.

Symptoms

The symptoms are poor appetite, increased temperature and a drop in milk yield. Cows appear unwell.

In newborn ruminants and foetuses, suspect cases are considered to be cases of limb and brain defects, shortening of the hamstrings, deformation of the jaw, or newborns with paralysis, neurological disorders, exaggerated movements or blindness, feeding difficulties and poor balance.

Treatment

There's no treatment for this virus and cows recover in a matter of days.

The risk to UK herds

As the virus is thought to be vector borne – like Bluetongue – the risk of spread at this time of year is negligible. During the vector season, however, the risk level is likely to rise. This will depend on what the vector is and its distribution.

It is also difficult to quantify the risk of introducing the disease into the UK through imports of cattle. But given the numbers of recent imports during the risk period, and the current distribution of the disease in northern Europe, it is a real possibility that disease will be found in the UK cattle herd.

The risk of spread is difficult to quantify until the full epidemiological characteristics of the disease are known.

