

Be alert to the Schmallenberg risk

Producers are being warned to keep an eye on calves and imported cattle for signs of a new virus. **Rachael Porter** reports

As the first cases of Schmallenberg virus are being reported in the UK, livestock producers – particularly those who have recently imported stock from the Netherlands or Germany – are being urged to keep a watchful eye for symptoms.

Note calves born between summer 2011 and now and report any abortions and deformities, advises vet Ed Hewitt from the Ayrshire-based Armour Vet Centre. “As infection may have occurred some time ago, it would be difficult to take disease control measures on affected premises, but it’s a virus to consider once the midge season begins again in spring, if producers see sick cattle or sheep,” he says.

Although it is not a notifiable disease in the UK, producers should be vigilant and inform their vet if they think they see Schmallenberg virus symptoms, he adds. “Stillbirths, malformations or nervous disease in new-

born calves or foetuses, born to imported animals, should be sent for screening to the AHVLA.”

Clinical signs in cattle include fever, reduced milk yield (up to 50%), loss of appetite and condition and, in some cases, diarrhoea.

EIGHTY HERDS AFFECTED

Since the summer, both the Netherlands and Germany have reported outbreaks of Schmallenberg virus. An estimated 80 herds were affected in the Netherlands and although cattle recovered in days, there have now been reports of foetal abnormalities and spontaneous abortion from 120 herds.

“The impact on fertility and milk yield are a huge worry for Dutch beef and dairy producers,” says Wim van der Poel, research leader at the Central Veterinary Institute, Wageningen University, in the Netherlands. He is also Professor of Emerging and Zoonotic

Viruses at Liverpool University.

He is getting reports of foetus and calf abnormalities coming in all the time and sheep producers are also having a difficult time.

“The lambing season, so far, has been an unprecedented disaster on some sheep units, with some producers reporting a 50% or higher fatality/abnormality rate in this year’s lamb crop. With many more thousands of ewes set to lamb in the next few months, numbers are expected to increase,” he says.

Bluetongue was initially blamed when Dutch and German producers reported symptoms of sick stock in August and September 2011, “but it was the symptom of diarrhoea that didn’t fit with bluetongue,” says Mr van der Poel.

“Schmallenberg virus was first reported in the same area of the Netherlands where bluetongue was first detected, which probably aroused suspicions that it could

SYMPTOMS

The Schmallenberg virus is thought to be vector-borne, like bluetongue. The risk of introduction at this time of year would normally have been negligible as the UK is usually vector-free during the winter.

During the vector season, however, the risk level rises. It depends on what the vector is and its distribution.

Watch out for increased temperature, poor appetite and a drop in milk yield. The cow appears generally unwell and it is likely that several cows will have the same symptoms over the same time period.

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

have been this virus. But it’s not and there are real fears that the devastation caused by bluetongue in the Netherlands in 2007 and 2008 could be seen again this year. It could even be worse because, as yet, there is no vaccine to protect against the virus.”