

Sheep virus cases just the tip of the iceberg

▶▶ Midges carrying SBV the likely cause

▶▶ More cases found in south of England

By Alistair Driver

UNCERTAINTY surrounds the potential scale and severity of the Schmallenberg virus (SBV) outbreak after further cases were confirmed in south east England this week.

In total, 11 cases of the virus have been confirmed on sheep farms in Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Kent and East Sussex.

The location of the confirmed cases is consistent with the theory the farms were infected by midges blown across the English Channel from affected areas in Europe last autumn.

Vets, however, suspect the confirmed cases represent the tip of the iceberg.

Toby Kemble, of the Wensum Valley Veterinary Surgery in Norfolk, said about six out of 10 of the practice's clients who had started lambing had 'probably had the disease in their flocks', which included one confirmed case.

In some cases, only a small proportion of lambs were affected, while in the worst case it was one in four, he said.

"We are only going to know the extent of it once people have started lambing and calving because the main signs are deformed lambs and calves," said Mr Kemble.

British Veterinary Association president Carl Padgett said it would be impossible to gauge the level of infection until a serological test becomes available.

A process involving gene analysis is currently used to diagnose the disease.

Test development


He said Defra and AHVLA, along with other EU countries, were working hard to develop a blood test, which he hoped would be available 'within weeks'.

"Until we get a serological blood test that shows exposure, we don't know where the infection has gone and the proportion of infected animals that have these horrible problems with the lamb crop," he said.

Adult animals tend to show few symptoms and recover quickly but it is thought sheep and cows infected during the first third of their pregnancy are most vulnerable to problems with their offspring.

But one of the unknowns is what will happen to calves of cows infected in the early stages of pregnancy in the autumn, due to calve in a month's time, Mr Padgett said.

The next 'big concern' will be whether infected midges begin spreading the virus more widely once the midge season starts again in spring, he added.

 **MORE INFORMATION:**
See SBV symptoms at www.farmersguardian.com