

Alistair Driver reports on *Farmers Guardian's* Schmallenberg virus discussion, the latest in our series of live internet debates.

A clearer picture will soon emerge

► Size and scale of outbreak still cloudy

► Survival of midges will determine scale

Farmers Guardian
WEB DEBATE

THE ability of midges carrying the Schmallenberg virus (SBV) to survive the winter will determine the scale of the outbreak in Britain, experts have warned.

During a live *Farmers Guardian* internet discussion last Friday (February 10), a panel of farming and veterinary specialists acknowledged the virus was already widespread in the south east of England.

The official number of confirmed cases, which then stood

at 29, appears to represent only a fraction of the true level of infection. A clearer picture will emerge as lambing and calving progresses during spring.

Defra deputy chief veterinary officer Alick Simmons said: "The disease has been found in a number of farms across the south east and the cases are quite widely spread. It is quite possible there are cases which have gone unnoticed and there are more to come."

Norfolk vet Toby Kemble

reinforced these comments when he said out of 10 of his practice's clients who had lambed so far, six appeared to have had problems caused by the virus, suggesting it was more widespread than first thought.

The next big threat to the livestock industry across the country might arise when the midges reappear in the warmer spring weather.

Unknown

Whether this could lead to wider disease spread, Mr Simmons said: "That is a possibility, either from infection in England spreading back into midges or from infected midges blowing in from the near continent, but we just don't know."

Mr Kemble summed up the uncertainty surrounding the short and medium-term outlook. "I think we are going to see an increasing number of cases throughout the spring, with



Norfolk vet Toby Kemble expects to see an increasing number of cases as lambing progresses.

It is quite possible there are cases which have gone unnoticed
ALICK SIMMONS

some worse than others," he said.

"If the virus survives the winter the disease will be here to stay. If it doesn't, then things may well ease in future years."

National Sheep Association chief executive Phil Stocker said it was the unknown which was causing concern among farmers. "Many are still approaching lambing and do not know if they will be affected."

He said some farmers were not reporting cases as they were worried about the impact on their business. "It is essential testing and reporting is done in confidence," he said.

Kent farmer Howard Bates, an NFU livestock board member, said: "As the days go by, there clearly appears more to worry about. Most farmers near me with lambing flocks at present are having problems."

FG's Schmallenberg debate

THE discussion featured five experts on the panel:

- Alick Simmons, Defra deputy chief veterinary officer
- Dr Franz Conraths, head of epidemiology at the Friedrich-Loeffler-Institut, Germany
- Phil Stocker, National Sheep Association chief executive
- Toby Kemble, Norfolk vet
- Howard Bates, farmer on the

Romney Marshes, Kent, and member of the NFU livestock board

The event was watched live by more than 500 people, who submitted numerous comments and questions, which the panellists answered comprehensively.

The full discussion can be seen at www.farmersguardian.com/your-space

Key points from the Schmallenberg discussion

Q Where did the virus come from?

A Schmallenberg virus (SBV) is named after the German town where it was first identified last year, but German expert Franz Conraths said how it got there was unknown. "This particular virus has never before been isolated. Similar viruses have been observed here and in Africa, India, Japan and Australia," he said.

Q What are the symptoms of the virus?

A Mr Kemble said there was nothing to show a ewe may have affected lambs inside her until she actually lambs.

"But we are hearing about difficulties people are having trying to get these lambs out because of the deformed limbs.

"It is important farmers recognise...a lamb might not be able to physically be removed from the ewe. From a welfare point of view, these animals either need a caesarean section or euthanasia.

"In cattle, on the continent in the autumn, the clinical signs were diarrhoea, milk drop and a transient fever. This was short-lived and the adults recovered quickly. The next obvious signs were the deformed calves."

Q What is the situation in Europe?

A Mr Conraths said 700 cases had been reported in Belgium, France, Germany and

the Netherlands, almost all of them in sheep, while cattle (just 23 cases) and goats were also affected. Around 40-50 per cent of newborn lambs were affected.

Q Was the virus circulating within midges and ruminants in England from August 2011? (Asked by Howard Bates)

A Norfolk vet Toby Kemble said: "Present thoughts are infected midges came over in August/September. If these survived over the mild autumn they could still have been infecting animals in-lamb/in-calf as late as November, which could mean problems for the March and later lambers and calvers."

Q Will Defra introduce movement restrictions?

A No. Mr Simmons said the spread was 'almost certainly driven primarily by midges rather than the movement of live animals'.

Q Is what we've seen so far (in England) just the tip of the iceberg? (Asked by Rudy Ruitenber)

A Mr Kemble said, with many farmers yet to lamb or calf, the answer was categorically 'yes'.

Mr Simmons suggested the discovery of the virus as far west as Hertfordshire was significant. The area of England which could have been exposed

to infected midges has had to be expanded as the affected area in continental Europe increased.

Q Will testing and reporting be done in confidence?

A Mr Simmons said: "Defra is keen to encourage reporting so we get a clear picture of the disease. The details of farms affected will not be disclosed."

Q When will a blood test be available? (Asked by James Griffin)

A Mr Simmons said Defra was working closely with laboratories in Germany and Netherlands to develop a test but it was still 'some weeks away'.

Q Can non-pregnant animals become infected, with the infection remaining latent until pregnancy is achieved? (Emily)

A Mr Stocker said: "My understanding is the infectious period for sheep is short-lived, four or five days, but if this is at the early stage of pregnancy, the lamb is at risk."

Q Will infected animals build immunity to the infection? (Asked by RS and others)

A Mr Conraths said experimental infections in cattle showed it was 'not unlikely infected animals mount protective immune response'.

Mr Simmons said evidence suggests the disease 'might be transient and once infected they develop rapid immunity'.

Q Can monogastrics be ruled out? (Asked by Wright)

A Pigs and poultry (monogastrics) do not appear to be at risk, Mr Simmons said.

Q When will a vaccine be available?

A Mr Conraths said the virus was made available to the vaccine industry a few weeks ago, but the lead time for such a product was rather long.

Q To what extent could dipping and other ecto treatments protect stock from midge/insect bites? (Asked by Phil Stocker)

A Mr Kemble said ecto parasite treatments are, as with bluetongue, 'the only defence at the moment'. But Mr Simmons said insecticides would be 'expensive with little guarantee of success'.

Q Could humans be affected?

A Mr Conraths said there was no evidence of human infection but it could not be ruled out. He said scientists in Germany were trying to convince farmers to get blood-tested. "If we succeed, the results may tell us in a couple of weeks," he said.

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