

Workshop gives advice on liver fluke control

by Neil Ryder

THE wet summer of 2012 provided near-perfect conditions for the spread of liver fluke, with implications for the health and welfare of sheep and the economics of sheep farming.

Novartis, the animal health company, linked up with Westmorland Veterinary Group for a farm-based fluke workshop hosted by Chris Gibson, of Low Audlands Farm, Endmoor, Cumbria.

Kate Hovers, veterinary surgeon and sheep specialist, told the get-together that in a normal year, the peak period for liver fluke infection ran from late summer through to about October or November – but last year, new cases were reported running into the winter and as late as February.

This was largely the result of near-ideal conditions for the mud snail which is an

intermediate host for the liver fluke and is found in wet, muddy ground.

Veterinary investigation laboratories have reported a ten-fold increase in cases of acute liver fluke infection and a four-fold increase in cases of chronic fluke infection.

She said: "There are a lot of farmers who have found that what they have traditionally done on their farms to control fluke has not really been effective.

"A lot of sheep have been lost, but in addition, a lot of ewes have been empty and in poor condition. This was due to the challenging nutritional conditions of last year, though this year has been far better.

"In many cases of poor condition during 2012, it is almost certain that fluke was to blame and it has also led to loss of lambs in mid-pregnancy.

"There has also been reduced milk production in



BOGGY GROUND: Hunting for mud snails, which are intermediate liver fluke hosts, during the Cumbria workshop

turn meaning less colostrum available for lambs."

Ms Hovers said that while liver fluke affected sheep and cattle, the latter were generally less severely affected, possibly because the greater size of the cattle liver made it able to withstand fluke better.

She said new blood and

DNA tests were being developed to detect fluke infections. However, these indicated exposure to fluke, not the presence of fluke.

In sheep, they would, perhaps, be best used on lambs which would show a current challenge from fluke, whereas a positive result in a ewe

would show that the animal had been exposed to fluke at some point in its life.

In terms of prevention, she said that some control could be achieved by fencing or draining wet areas and, if possible, grazing stock away from such areas during the peak fluke infection periods.

Fluke could also be introduced with infected stock brought in from outside, and by infected mud snails carried in flood water.

John Wilson and vet Fiona Anderson, of Novartis, said fluke control medications would only be effective if the equipment used to drench sheep was in good condition and was calibrated to ensure the correct dose was given.

The correct dosage was related to the size of the sheep which could vary greatly within a flock. Most farms had a weighing unit and should use this to assess the average weight of the sheep to be dosed.

It was recommended to err a little on overdosing the smaller sheep, rather than giving too small a dose.

A small overdose was unlikely to cause any problems but underdosing might not fully clear the infection and, potentially, lead to problems of drug resistance.

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DEMONSTRATION: Rachael Robertson, of Westmorland Veterinary Group, dissects a fluke-infested liver

Vital to select the correct flukicide

FARMERS should always check the active ingredients when deciding what flukicides to use and not assume that just because a product has a different brand name that it has different active ingredients.

Rachael Robertson, veterinary surgeon with the Westmorland Veterinary Group said that in many instances different products were needed to deal with different stages in fluke development or to deal with instances of drug resistance.

Often farmers thought that this was just a matter of using different brands of flukicide without realising that, although the packaging was different, the key active ingredient remained the same.

It is also recommended not to use flukicides in combination with other drugs, except possibly when a wormer is also needed.

There are six key flukicides:

- Triclabendazole – effective against fluke from two days to adult in cattle and sheep. Only effective against small fluke.
- Closantel – operates on animals from six weeks old to adult and most effective after nine weeks.
- Nitroxylin – effective on fluke from six to nine weeks old and most effective after nine weeks.
- Clorsulon – only effective against adult fluke and often combined with ivermectin.
- Oxyclozanide – kills adult fluke.
- Albendazole – only effective against adult fluke but is also used against gutworm and lungworm. If used against fluke, the dose needs to be 1.5 times greater than if used purely as a wormer.