



## **January Sheep Health**

### **AHWNl Flock Health Focus: Bluetongue- The Need for Tight Controls Explained**

The Bluetongue outbreak in NI has caused a lot of concern and the introduction of restriction zones and export restrictions have had a significant impact on trade.

Thankfully, we are now in a vector inactive period, meaning there should be little midge activity, reducing the risk of spread between infected midges and livestock.

### **Bluetongue**

Bluetongue virus (BTV) is an infectious, but non-contagious (between livestock), vector-borne viral disease. BTV can affect all ruminants, including sheep and cattle. Infection occurs when a biting midge carrying the bluetongue virus (BTV) feeds on an animal. Once infected, that animal can act as a source of virus for other midges, allowing the disease to spread further during periods of midge activity. Bluetongue does not spread through direct animal-to-animal contact.

The main symptoms that have been seen in sheep (in England and Wales) so far are: lethargy, lameness and a reluctance to walk. However, other symptoms can include: fever, panting, nasal discharge, facial swelling, ulceration of the mouth, abortions/deformed foetuses and death.

### **Restrictions Explained**

A question many farmers are asking is- why is there a need for movement restrictions or a potential cull (as had been done in England) if the virus is not contagious between ruminants?

Once infected with BTV, the infected animal acts as a 'virus factory', meaning any midge that bites that animal will become infected. Therefore, if an undetected, infected animal is moved to a 'clean area', they will spread the virus to any midges in the area. This will then lead to spread of the disease to other animals through midges, with more midges becoming infected, and therefore more animals. Midges also could potentially travel with cattle in trailers, introducing them to a new area

There is always the risk that midges may be blown into an infected area, however, reducing the possibility of infected animals entering a clean area is one of the main points of control, as we cannot control midge movements.

### **How Can I Reduce Any BTV Risk To My Flock?**

The current period has been classified as a vector-inactive period, meaning the risk of further spread by midges is low. BTV must replicate inside the midge before it can be transmitted, and this process only occurs at sustained temperatures above approximately 12 °C, with higher risk as average daily temperatures approach 15 °C.

However, come early Spring, midges will become active again and there is a risk of further disease spread across the country. The following are some tips that can be used to reduce chances of BTV on your farm:

- **Vaccinate to reduce severe clinical signs-** livestock keepers must apply to DAERA to vaccinate and must discuss with their private vet whether it is appropriate. This will depend on your location, prevalent serotype in the region, current weather conditions and whether you wish to export animals.
- **Reduce potential midge breeding grounds-** midges are attracted to damp and muddy areas and this is where they lay their eggs. Try to keep animals away from muck heaps. Anywhere with standing water is a risk so remove these if they are near animals where possible, such as old tires.
- **Ensure housing has proper ventilation-** strong airflow, such as using fans, can prevent midges from settling as they are known to be unable to fly in high winds. While not realistic for many farmers, fine mesh screens are an option that can be installed in housing to keep midges out.
- **Source livestock responsibly**
- **Continually monitor livestock for symptoms-** lameness can be a common symptom in sheep, so prompt investigation of any lameness cases could reveal disease.

## **The Next Steps**

Bluetongue control depends on vigilance. Stay informed, monitor animals, review biosecurity, and seek veterinary advice on vaccination and movements. A proactive approach now will help protect flocks and herds as midges become active again.