Producers encouraged to post-mortem suspected Schmallenberg cases

English livestock producers are being urged to submit lambs with suspected Schmallenberg virus (SBV) for post-mortem examination as the number of confirmed cases of the disease grows.

The disease was recently detected in lambs on four holdings in the North East of England, including Northumberland, by the post-mortem diagnostic service at John Warren ABP in County Durham, established by AHDB Beef & Lamb. Schmallenberg virus was previously detected in the South West of England last month and subsequently in North Yorkshire.

Schmallenberg is capable of infecting pregnant sheep and cattle and causing severe malformations of foetuses in the womb. It emerged across Western Europe in November 2011 and, by July 2013, calves, lambs and kids with severe skeletal deformities had been reported in at least 24 European countries. Importantly, the virus does not spread from animal to animal but, like Bluetongue virus, is transmitted by midges, which infect the animals when they bite.

No, or very few, cases of Schmallenberg virus causing deformed calves or lambs were confirmed in 2014 or 2015, possibly as a result of immunity built up by animals following the 2011/12 epidemic.

Ben Strugnell, of Farm Post Mortem Ltd, which operates the service at J Warren ABP, said: “The possible re-emergence of Schmallenberg was predicted following a study in autumn 2015 which tested young flock replacement sheep in the south of England, the results of which suggested that levels of immunity may have dropped.

“It is very important that, if producers encounter lambs with skeletal deformities, these are submitted for post-mortem examination so that appropriate samples can be taken to establish whether Schmallenberg is the cause. The best advice for producers is to contact their vet, who can provide information on the best way to arrange a post-mortem.

“Blood sampling of ewes which have affected lambs is also useful. Younger sheep may be most at risk as older ones may be immune from previous exposure to the virus.

“At present there are no vaccines available for Schmallenberg and it is already too late to vaccinate sheep which are due to lamb in spring. However, it is important that we ascertain the true levels of the virus, because this will help determine whether there is a need to vaccinate later in the year.”

Information on the current disease situation will be reflected in the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) quarterly disease surveillance reports.
More information on the post-mortem data collected as part of the AHDB Beef & Lamb-funded project at John Warren ABP and its role in disease surveillance can be found in the Fallen Stock Project bulletin.

- Ends -

Notes to editors

AHDB is a statutory levy board, funded by farmers, growers and others in the supply chain. Its purpose is to equip levy payers with independent, evidence-based information and tools to grow, become more competitive and sustainable. Established in 2008 and classified as a Non-Departmental Public Body, it supports the following industries: meat and livestock (cattle, sheep and pigs) in England; horticulture, milk and potatoes in Great Britain; and cereals and oilseeds in the UK. AHDB’s remit covers 75 per cent of total UK agricultural output. Further information on AHDB can be found at www.ahdb.org.uk

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