

BLUETONGUE



Bluetongue maternal link discovered

Scientists at IAH have recently uncovered a further worrying development about BTv8 – the possibility that the virus can survive the winter by passing from pregnant, but BTv8 infected, ruminant animals to their unborn foetuses.

Until recently, most bluetongue scientists agreed that cross-placental infection by the BT virus of an unborn foetus from its mother only occurred when laboratory-adapted strains of virus were used and the mother was infected during her pregnancy under lab conditions. These experiments resulted in re-absorption of the foetus, abortion, and the birth of weak or deformed offspring. Amongst these 'surviving' offspring some were shown to have bluetongue virus in their bloodstream ie, they were viraemic.

It was not thought possible that this could happen in the field until recently when, in Holland and the UK, viraemic offspring have been born to animals that were infected last year.

Work at IAH-Pirbright in the 1970s showed that infectious virus was present in the offspring up to 60 days after birth. As the dams had been infected at around 60-70 days into their pregnancy, this means that there was a period of approximately 145 days between infection of the mother and the end of viraemia in the offspring.

Such a time period would easily cover the period from the end of one transmission season (December; when the temperatures are too cold for midge activity and too cold for the virus to grow in midges) to the start of the next (April; when temperatures rise sufficiently) in the UK and elsewhere in northern Europe.

There is the distinct possibility that this new development could increase the disease reservoir in the UK, potentially providing 'clean' midges with a fresh source of virus when they take a blood meal.



Don't hesitate – vaccinate!

A Joint campaign Against Bluetongue (JAB) has been launched in a bid to achieve mass vaccination of all bluetongue susceptible animals in the UK, as soon as vaccine becomes available.

Spearheaded by the NFU, JAB is supported by 12 organisations from across the livestock industry, including the CLA, British Cattle Veterinary Association and the National Sheep Association as well as other organisations such as breed societies, livestock markets, meat processing and the veterinary professions. The initiative is supported by Defra and Animal Health.

The campaign will use national and regional media, as well as more direct contact through farmers meetings, livestock markets and private veterinary surgeries.

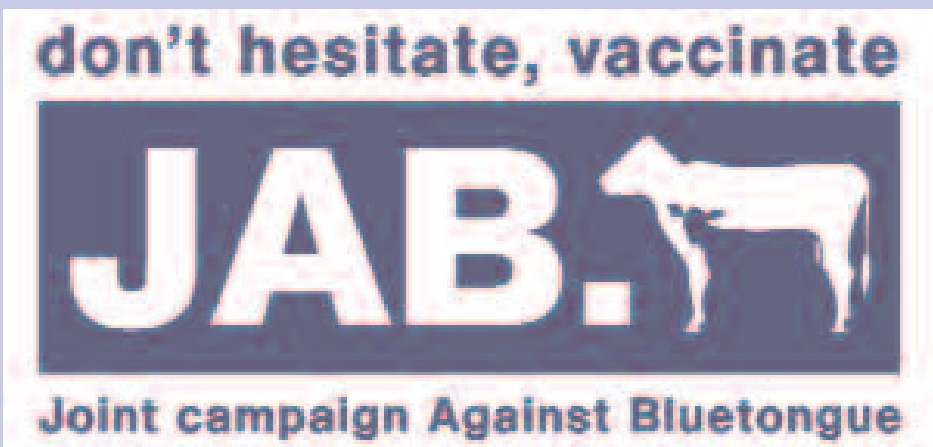
Regional offices are distributing thousands of bluetongue awareness postcards and posters (pictured) to help get the vaccination programme underway as soon as possible.

The vaccine process is going well and whilst Intervet only talked about 3m doses being ready in May, they now have now said publicly that they hope to have 5m doses ready by the end of May. The product is now licensed for use in the UK and is the only

BTv8 product currently licensed.

Discussion is also continuing with Defra, with regard to the possibility of ordering an additional 8m doses of vaccine for England.

For more information, visit www.nfuonline.com and click on the dedicated bluetongue page.



News for Camelid and goat owners

The bluetongue vaccine is licensed for cattle and sheep but any other susceptible species (llamas, goats, etc) can be prescribed the vaccine under what is known as the cascade system. When there is no suitable medicine available (as in the case of llamas, alpacas, goats, etc for BTv8) this system permits veterinary use of medicines intended for other clinical indications or species, specifically under the direction of a vet.

Intervet launch bluetongue website

A website dedicated solely to bluetongue has been launched by animal health company Intervet. Aimed at educating both farmers and vets, www.bluetongue-info.co.uk contains details about the vaccine, the

spread of the disease and links to other organisations involved with the disease.

The site also gives recommended dosage for sheep and cattle, and is updated on a regular basis.



DEFRA unveils UK vaccination roll-out plan

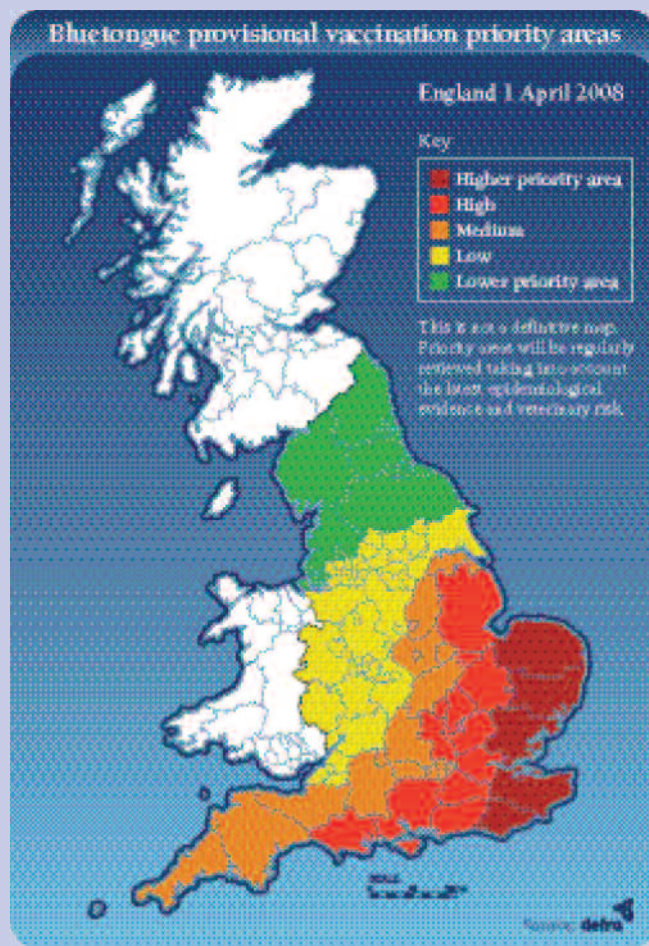
Defra has unveiled its plan for phasing in bluetongue vaccination, with the aim of facilitating the rapid transfer of vaccine as soon as it becomes available. A roll-out plan has been agreed by stakeholders which is flexible enough to take into account the changing nature of the disease, moving restriction zones, variable levels of disease and timing and availability of vaccine.

In May, Intervet will start to distribute the 20m doses for use in England and 2.5m doses in Wales. It is expected that the initial May delivery will be 3m doses and that overall delivery in May will reach 5m doses, with the remainder to be received in June, July and August.

Because EU law dictates that vaccination can only be carried out in a Protection Zone, roll-out of vaccine will be on a county by county basis, relying on a priority list which will be regularly reviewed throughout the year, depending on epidemiological evidence and veterinary risk.

A map has been published (see right) to indicate the current priority areas and to illustrate the roll-out process.

All livestock keepers wishing to purchase vaccine should speak to their private veterinarian for advice and to place an order.



The race to vaccinate

As the UK prepares itself for vaccination, *British Farmer and Grower* looks at how other European countries plan to vaccinate.

Scotland

The Scottish government has issued a tender for 12 million doses of BTv8 vaccine to be funded on a 50:50 basis with a maximum of £3m contribution from the Scottish government.

The Scottish intention is to implement a compulsory vaccination programme, although it would not be under official supervision and farmers would be able to vaccinate their own animals. The plan is to vaccinate this Winter, meaning they will be vaccinating for 2009 not 2008, unless the disease situation changes which would suggest a need to bring the vaccination plan forward.

On top of the £3m support for vaccination the Scottish government has also said that it will pay for the enforcement and surveillance for the vaccination plan.

Although the fact that there will be government funding will raise concerns for English farmers, to have run the Scottish proposal in England would have resulted in an increased cost for farmers, without increasing the effectiveness of vaccination, by making it more complicated and slowing down the vaccination process.

Defra has consistently said that they have no funding for bluetongue and that they will not contribute to the cost of vaccine,

although they have, of course, created the vaccine bank. In addition, Defra have also made it clear that if the English livestock industry wanted a compulsory scheme it would have to fund the surveillance and the enforcement costs.

The key difference between the Scottish and English situation is that north of the border livestock owners will be vaccinating for next year, whereas in England we have to vaccinate immediately. They have time to develop their plan and they can phase the vaccination process over the winter months, whereas we need to get vaccination moving within weeks and not months. A voluntary mass vaccination plan for England this year is still the best plan.

France

As many will have read, France has already had some BTv8 vaccine delivered. However, this vaccine has come from Merial and is limited to around 1.3m doses, already produced as part of the development process. Merial are not ready to deliver any more vaccine in France and the French government have gone to Intervet for their major order for BTv8 vaccine.

The delivered vaccine appears to have been sat on a shelf in a French Merial laboratory and looks as if, at this stage, it is a

one off batch. In addition, the Merial product is still not licensed for use in the UK.

Denmark

It is looking as though Danish farmers will have to bear the brunt of costs, according to a chief consultant from the Danish farmers' association. Denmark, which will soon be an all-out restriction zone, has put in a tender for vaccine and expects delivery in the autumn.

Germany and Belgium

Although there might be the possibility of an animal disease insurance fund generated by membership fees paid by individual farmers, German and Belgian farmers will still be faced with the restrictions placed on them by co-funding, resulting in them being unable to administer vaccine for themselves. This not only adds costs but also time to the vaccination process.

Is England better off?

In not opting for EU funding, the UK is set apart from the rest of the EU because its farmers are allowed to administer the vaccine themselves, even if it must be prescribed by a veterinarian. Significantly, this decision will speed up the process, help the UK to get ahead of the disease and stop the devastation seen in the rest of Europe.