

## Notification of planned bluetongue surveillance in cattle

*Dear colleagues*

1. Bluetongue virus (BTV), in particular BTV4 and BTV8, has in recent years spread through much of western Europe, including France, Germany, Switzerland and Belgium, which are the nearest countries to the UK currently under BTV restrictions. Most recently we have seen outbreaks of BTV8 in Belgium and Germany, BTV4 in Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia and BTV4 and BTV16 in Greece. Given the disease situation in Europe, it is therefore more important than ever that we undertake our annual bluetongue survey, to complement our passive surveillance programme and demonstrate to trading partners that we remain free from disease. The survey is designed to detect possible incursions into the UK, which might occur if infected midges are blown across the Channel.
2. Bluetongue is a notifiable disease and anyone suspecting disease must report it to APHA. The infection can affect cattle, sheep and goats, with varying clinical signs, depending upon the strain of the virus and species involved. The current BTV8 strain circulating in Europe can cause milder clinical signs in small ruminants and cattle compared to the 2007 BTV8 strain that was present in the UK, but research has shown that the current strain can still compromise animal health and welfare in those individuals that have not been vaccinated, or previously exposed to the virus. BTV4 rarely causes clinical signs in goats, but some meat producing sheep breeds can be seriously affected (up to 30% mortality reported in past outbreaks). Because cattle are more likely to be bitten by midges than sheep, we plan to monitor the disease situation in cattle via targeted laboratory-based surveillance in cattle herds.
3. A survey has been designed to sample cattle in areas which are considered at greatest risk of incursion, due to their relative proximity to the nearest countries to the UK under BTV restrictions. Based on Met Office modelling, at present we will be aiming to recruit at least 6 farms in each of the counties of East Sussex, West Sussex and Dorset, and 12 farms in Hampshire (including the Isle of Wight), Essex and Kent. Sampling is planned to take place at the end of the vector season, from November to December 2021. We will inform you if further Met Office modelling data for the 2021 vector season indicate any changes to the list of target counties.
4. The Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) will be contacting farms registered as keeping cattle in these counties to ask for their participation in the study. Farms scheduled for TB testing visits, or other farm visits, during the BTV survey window will be prioritised when possible, to reduce inconvenience to farmers. APHA colleagues will run through a short questionnaire (4 questions) with the livestock keepers, which will help to determine which farms are most at risk of bluetongue and therefore most appropriate for inclusion in the study. These questions will also take into account practical consideration, such as the availability of handling facilities.
5. Private veterinary surgeons, already engaged by APHA as part of the Veterinary Delivery Partnership, will visit the farm to collect blood samples from 15 animals and will send them to the National Reference Laboratory at the Pirbright Institute. The blood samples will be tested for bluetongue virus using PCR. The cost of sampling and analysis will be paid for by Defra. Under exceptional circumstances APHA vets may conduct some of the visits.

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6. Whilst we expect test results will demonstrate BTV has not arrived in the UK, it is always possible that test results will indicate BTV is present in one or more animals.
7. If BTV is detected, the herd will be placed under movement restrictions and an APHA vet will visit to undertake a veterinary investigation; to confirm the results and to establish whether there is any evidence that bluetongue has been circulating. To do this, further testing of susceptible animals within the herd will be carried out. APHA may visit other nearby farms to determine whether other animals in the area are affected by Bluetongue virus. *Culicoides* monitoring by the national laboratory at Pirbright may also be increased in the local area.
8. The UK Chief Veterinary Officer will use these findings to decide whether she should declare an outbreak of Bluetongue.
9. If disease is confirmed on a premises, we will take actions in accordance with our published bluetongue control strategy. Susceptible animals will be placed under movement restrictions. We expect infected animals will be restricted for at least 60 days, allowing them to recover from BTV and gain natural immunity. The survey will take place at a time of very low risk of BTV transmission, as consistent temperatures exceeding 11°C for several weeks are required for full infection of *Culicoides*. It is therefore very unlikely that infected animals will need to be culled to stop the virus spreading. However, each situation will be assessed on a case by case basis, and in the very unlikely event that an animal is culled, market-value compensation will be paid.

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/343402/bluetongue-control-strategy-140727.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/343402/bluetongue-control-strategy-140727.pdf)

10. We appreciate that the farmers involved in the survey will need to give up their time to facilitate sampling and may have concerns about taking part, particularly given the COVID-19 pandemic; but we would like to assure farmers that the vets undertaking the sampling will wear appropriate PPE and will comply with relevant government guidance, including observing appropriate social distancing. Participation in the survey will enable us to meet our legal obligations to undertake the surveillance and to provide assurance to trading partners that the UK remains free from bluetongue. You may recall a similar survey was undertaken in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020.
11. We trust you acknowledge the wider benefits this survey will provide to the UK agriculture industry. We would appreciate your support for this survey and would be grateful if you could share the information above with your members/clients, who keep cattle in these target areas; so that they are better informed, are aware in advance of APHA contacting them, and encouraging them to participate if approached.

*Vanessa Swinson, MRCVS, Veterinary Lead APHA Cattle Expert Group*  
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