

Concern over levels of Sheep Scab detected in NI flocks

A renowned sheep scab expert has expressed surprise at the levels of the disease being diagnosed from samples in local flocks following farmer-initiated involvement in a control project for the disease. Dr Stewart Burgess, who leads the Sheep Scab research group at the highly regarded Moredun Research Institute in Scotland, where research emphasis is placed on the prevention and sustainable control of sheep scab. He is currently leading Scab control projects in Northern Ireland (NI), England and the Western Isles of Lewis and Harris.

Dr Burgess commented that the level of responses to tests on blood samples from sheep in NI indicates that some flocks may have been infested with sheep scab mites for a prolonged period and that a high percentage of animals in these flocks are likely to have been infested. This unexpected level of ongoing infection to a wide extent in some flocks means that there is significant potential for local and onward spread of the disease. The ongoing project has identified a number of clear hotspots in NI with high risks of significant spread of scab.

Clinical signs of scab may develop over several months, however animal health and welfare can become compromised at an early stage. Transmission of the disease may occur directly (as the mite spreads from animal to animal) or indirectly via contaminated items such as scanning trailers, wool left on fences and hurdles or on clothing. There is therefore potential for sheep scab to spread at multiple locations, including at points of common use of facilities or equipment, at markets or shows. As lambing gets underway, it is important that anyone who suspects that scab may be present in their flock seeks advice at the earliest opportunity, to reduce the risk of having to deal with the disease in lambs as well as ewes.

Sheep production is important to the NI economy and collaboration between government and farmers is necessary to tackle endemic diseases in the sheep population. Improved sheep health and welfare would increase animal productivity, address the challenge of antimicrobial resistance and increase environmental sustainability through reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The levels of engagement in the NI project, funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), have been high, with enthusiastic responses to the scheme. Over 80 sheep farmers have engaged with the project, with most gaining on-farm advice, free blood testing and assistance with treatment.

The Sheep Scab control project is open to up to 100 flocks across NI on a first-come first-served basis. If your flock has been experiencing any clinical signs of sheep scab, you may be eligible to participate in the scheme. To find out more information, please phone AHWNI on 07517 599497/ 028 7963 9333 or email jenny.martin@animalhealthni.com or info@animalhealthni.com.



Image courtesy of SCOPS