

19 March 2024

CHIEF VETERINARY OFFICER BULLETIN

Bluetongue virus detected in sheep within the NSW bluetongue transmission zone

Current situation

NSW Department of Primary Industries and the Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness (ACDP) have confirmed the presence of bluetongue virus (BTV) in samples from four sheep properties. The detection of the virus was confirmed by qPCR (quantitative polymerase chain reaction) at ACDP on 15 March 2024.

Tests confirmed the virus strain BTV-1 at the four properties, which are within the north-east NSW BTV transmission zone. BTV1 is known to occur within the zone.

BTV cannot be spread from animals to humans. BTV does not present a food safety risk and all Australian lamb and mutton remains safe to eat. The virus causes production losses and mortalities in sheep.

This detection does not change Australia's status for bluetongue virus, as reported to the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH).

Bluetongue virus clinical signs

BTV is spread by biting insect vectors, particularly *Culicoides* midges. All ruminant species are susceptible. However, bluetongue is primarily a disease of sheep. Infection in cattle, although of great epidemiological significance, is usually subclinical. The virulence of different strains of bluetongue varies significantly.

The mortality rate is very variable in sheep and generally ranges from 0 to 30% depending on the virus strain and genotype of sheep. Goats are affected less commonly and less severely than sheep.

Clinical signs may range from acute to mild and typically involve:

- variable, fluctuating fever
 - lethargy,
 - hyperaemia of oral and nasal mucosae
 - excess salivation
 - nasal discharge
 - lips and tongue may become swollen and the oedema may extend over the face and intermandibular space
 - respiratory signs including difficulty breathing and
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- haemorrhages may occur on oral and conjunctival mucosae,
- Ulcers develop on the gums, cheek and tongue 5 to 8 days after the onset of fever
- feet lesions may appear towards the end of the febrile period with,
 - reddening and petechial haemorrhages on the coronary band
 - associated pain, which causes the animals to stand with arched backs and be reluctant to move.

BTV can mimic signs of pneumonia or photosensitisation.

Reporting bluetongue

Bluetongue in sheep is a notifiable disease in NSW. If you suspect BTV, see signs of disease or death consistent with bluetongue in your flock, immediately contact the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline, 1800 675 888 (24-hours a day) or your Local Lands Services District Veterinarian, 1300 295 299.

More information:

- National Arbovirus Monitoring Program (NAMP) Bluetongue Virus Zone Map – Animal Health Australia: <https://namp.animalhealthaustralia.com.au/public.php>
 - NSW Animal and Plant Health Laboratories (APHL) – Bluetongue: <https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/about-us/services/laboratory-services/veterinary/bluetongue>
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