

BLUETONGUE:

'Situation very concerning'

Last year, the sheep population of the Netherlands fell by 61,000 (-8.4 per cent) to 662,000 sheep, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) reported last week. The main culprit is bluetongue, a viral disease spread by midges that has been circulating in the Netherlands again since September 2023.

Noelle Hoorneman, a researcher at the Centre for Genetic Resources, the Netherlands (CGN), calls the situation 'very concerning, even when compared to previous epidemics of infectious diseases.'

Hoorneman, who also keeps sheep, clarifies her concerns: 'We had foot and mouth disease in 2001, then a bluetongue outbreak in 2006/2007. Those outbreaks had a big impact, but they didn't come anywhere near the numbers we are seeing now. We know bluetongue can potentially be very virulent and that certainly applies to this variant, which is about twice as deadly and spreads two to three times faster.'

Provincial distribution

The CBS figures show that the biggest decline in sheep numbers was in the provinces of Noord-Holland and Friesland, with about 15,000 fewer sheep each than the previous year. In percentages, this is a fall of 15.7 per cent in Noord-Holland and 11.5 per cent in Friesland. The percentage fall in Utrecht province was also substantial, at 15.4 per cent. In absolute numbers, the decrease was 6,500 sheep. Sheep numbers fell by about 10 per cent in Drenthe and Gelderland. Noord-Brabant was the only province to see an increase in the number of sheep last year (+6.4 per cent).

Hoorneman: 'Those figures clearly show the influence of bluetongue. Sheep numbers are declining anyway because various factors are putting



pressure on sheep farmers. The bonus for grazing animals has been abolished, the agricultural tenancy rules have changed and of course some sheep farmers are stopping because of the wolf. But those factors don't have this obvious geographical effect. You can clearly see the midge distribution reflected in the CBS figures.'

Vaccine

Sheep farmers have pinned their hopes on a safe and efficacious vaccine. That proved an effective weapon in putting an end to the bluetongue (serotype 8) outbreak in 2006. It looks as if there could soon be a vaccine for this bluetongue outbreak too: Agriculture minister Piet Adema says at least one pharma company has a candidate it wants to test. Melle Holwerda (Wageningen Bioveterinary Research) confirms that one vaccine is ready for testing by the National Reference Laboratory for Vector-borne and Zoonotic Viral Diseases, which he heads. 'We will have the results in May at the earliest. If the outcome is positive, this will be followed by the approval procedure. If there are no hitches, the vaccine could be available for use in the summer,' says Holwerda.

Bluetongue could endanger the survival of rare Dutch sheep breeds, Hoorneman previously told Resource. There is still little known about the suspected differences in susceptibility of various sheep breeds, as discussed in that article. Hoorneman: 'WUR is paying a lot of attention to this aspect. For example, on 1 March there is a symposium *Genetic Selection: to Reduce the Impact of Infectious Diseases in Livestock*, to mark the PhD defence of Dries Hulst. Based on my own observations, I have a strong impression that some breeds are more susceptible than others. But as a scientist, I should point out we don't yet have the numbers. And solid research is needed first before we can know for sure.' ME

Other ruminants

The impact of the bluetongue virus on populations of other ruminants seems limited, based on the CBS figures. Goat numbers fell by 1.6 per cent, which is in line with the previous year. The fall in the number of cattle was even smaller: 0.7 per cent.