

EFSA requested to support EU with work on Schmallenberg virus

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has an important animal health and welfare remit and it is in this context, that the European Commission has requested urgent scientific and technical assistance for possible risks resulting from the "Schmallenberg" virus [SBV].

SBV that affects mainly sheep but also cattle and goats can result in birth defects. Named after the German town where it was first identified, the SBV, which belongs to a vector-transmitted group of viruses, was found in Europe in the 2nd half of 2011, and to date has infected animals in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

EFSA has extensive knowledge in the area of vector-borne diseases -- transmitted for instance by insects -- and although there are many uncertainties associated with this new virus, the Authority will provide in the short-term, the European Commission and Member States with likely scenarios on how the virus could manifest itself in animals in the coming months.

EFSA will also work together with Member States to ensure that the epidemiological data that exist, and those the Member States will produce and the Authority will subsequently collect, can be used to maximum effect through the provision of guidance. Periodical reports will be shared on the status and analysis of the data collected.

Once the data have been collected, EFSA will provide an overall assessment of the impact of SBV infection on animal health, animal production, and animal welfare together with a state-of-the-art review on what is known about the virus.

There is currently no evidence that the Schmallenberg virus could cause illness in humans. In December 2011 the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) carried out a preliminary assessment on the possible animal to human transmission risks of the new virus, which concluded that "it is unlikely that this virus can cause disease in humans, but it cannot be completely excluded at this stage." In light of these findings, EFSA is liaising closely with ECDC and will address areas of concern for human health, should these arise.

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Communicated by:
Sabine Zentis
Castleview Pedigree English Longhorns
Gut Laach
52385 Nideggen
Germany
<cvlonghorns@aol.com>