

POLICY BRIEF: Animal Keeper's perceptions of BTV during the 2025 season

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Overview

- Bluetongue virus (BTV) is not currently a concern that is voiced by Scottish Farmers as it is seen as a 'down south' problem. Other issues are more pressing in their day to day, such as Schmallenberg, a cause of abortions and birth abnormalities in both sheep and cattle, from vector borne incursions.
- Farmers viewed messaging around BTV as disjointed and inconsistent, particularly around the need to vaccinate between and within private vet practices and the Scottish Government.
- Farmers felt stressed at the changing rules surrounding restriction zones and advice on vaccination, which had economic impacts on their farm businesses and resulted in making timely decisions about their business even more challenging.

Objectives

The objective of this research was to:

- Explore Scottish farmers' experiences (particularly those in the Scottish border regions, closest to England)
- Examine their concerns regarding the current BTV outbreak in the UK
- Consider the effect of the policies implemented by the Scottish Government on their farm practices.

It was important to establish how the communication by policymakers and others (e.g., farming organisations, private vet practices, etc.) were being received on the ground and how the farmers were implementing and interpreting the advice. This was critical to then feedback to policymakers in a timely manner, as concerns regarding how the information farmers were receiving from their vets and the government were not always in sync. For instance, vaccination advice and best practices to mitigate the spread of BTV. This was key to capture and apply this research outcome to policy, so that considerations on how the policies were being interpreted and implemented on the ground differed from intended.

Major Findings

The key finding was that Scottish farmers did not want to talk about BTV. Many attempts were made to arrange in-person workshops, that would have given opportunities for the farmers to voice their concerns, however, the numbers of participants in various border regions were low. An online workshop was held to bring the few livestock producers that did want to be involved together. A different approach, using existing QMS, Young farmer and NFUS meetings to engage farmers, equally gained no traction. Finally, a survey was created and shared to farmers

during the winter surveillance, with no responses. We can conclude that livestock keepers in the Scottish borders and throughout Scotland do not want to voice opinions around BTV and are currently not concerned about BTV. One reason would point to the lack of reported cases in Scotland at the time of the research (the closest cases were in southern Cumbria). Therefore, the mitigations and policies that were put in place to prevent spread of disease were arguably successful because there were no reported cases in Scotland.

The messaging around BTV, however, was reported to be unclear by the participants in the online workshop. This included messaging from the Scottish Government. This related to changing policies around livestock at shows and movements across the border. From the online workshop some farmers reported how this impacted their mental health, as the rapidly changing advice on vaccination and attending shows resulted in uncertainty in the agricultural community and subsequently trust in the messaging from the government. Not knowing the exact location of an outbreak was worrying, with keepers expressing that they were constantly wondering *'do my neighbours have it?'* Furthermore, although the restricted zones were viewed as positive policy measures, farmers reported stress and anxiety regarding how the changing extent of the restricted zones impacted their farm businesses and the potential long term economic effects.

Relevance to Policy

These findings highlight the importance of communicating rapidly changing policies in times of uncertainty. Targeted messaging to farmers should be consistent from all agencies and communicated through formal and informal networks, the latter being vet practices and social media/WhatsApp groups. Furthermore, the impacts of such policies should consider not just economic impact but also impact on the mental health of all those involved in the livestock industry. Although there are no cases of BTV recorded in Scotland, the confusion around the messaging was evident. This could have impacted how communications on future disease outbreaks are received by the whole livestock industry, in terms of rule following and engagement with policy updates.

Important Assumptions and Limitations

Limitations of this research included the low farmer engagement and lower than expected participation numbers in the workshops and the online survey. This is a double-edged sword, as the researchers experienced challenges with recruitment of farmer participants, partly due to the fact that there were no cases of BTV recorded in Scotland. Although this is positive, it meant that farmers were not keen to speak about BTV, as it was not high on their priority agenda for the day to day running of the farm.

Links to Existing Publications and Reports

Mahon N., Hardy C., Kyle C. 2025. UK Farmer and advisor views on Bluetongue, its management and control. EPIC Report, EPIC_202526_REP_002v2. https://www.epicscotland.org/media/ubklb-feb/report_uk-farmer-and-advisor-views-on-bluetongue.pdf