

Summary of Health Schemes for Sheep

by Neil Laing



SCRAPIE

This has become the biggest challenge for trade across the Irish Sea. Whilst there is still work going on between the administrations on both sides of the water, and with the EU, which might change what is required over time, this is how things stand at the time of writing.

All sheep being moved need to be either from a Scrapie monitored flock, or be a genotype ARR/ARR.

The rules for becoming Scrapie Monitored are quite prescriptive and potentially costly:

- ALL fallen stock needs to be brain stem tested clear for Scrapie.
- Replacements can only be sourced from similarly certified flocks.
- Membership takes at least 3 years, with the above rules to complete.

So, as it stands, even if all members joined the scheme tomorrow, it would take at least 3 years before we could trade sheep which are not ARR/ARR across the water. There are also implications for Irish sheep coming over here to a Show or Sale.

Maedi Visna (MV)

This disease has variable infection rates across the UK, but if it is present in a flock it can have a big effect on productivity, hence why some commercial farmers are interested in avoiding it. It presents as increase in culling due to poor milk, increase of lameness, poor condition, and an increase in pneumonia. Because of this it can be difficult to suspect in a flock until

there is a high proportion of the sheep infected, which itself causes a problem with eradication.

Freedom from this disease is also a health requirement for trade with the island of Ireland.

There are Health Schemes that offer accreditation against MV, and these have been around for a number of years. These usually involve testing a large proportion of the flock each year, after initially testing all the animals twice. Again, like other Schemes, replacements should be sourced from Accredited flocks or they need 2 tests first. This can become costly for commercial flocks, but from a pedigree perspective can allow seamless trade across the Irish Sea, particularly for lambs.

Recently there has been a new Scheme launched offering MONITORED FREE STATUS. This is NOT the same as Accreditation, and doesn't meet the export requirements for this disease, but can offer a cheaper form of assurance that the disease is absent/present at very low levels for a commercial buyer of, say, mules. Two Schemes exist from different labs and have slightly different testing requirements, so you should definitely speak to your own vet about which one might suit your farm best.

Johne's Disease

Like cattle there are now Health Schemes offering levels of freedom from Johne's disease. There is a Scheme that mimics the cattle scheme exactly and involves testing all sheep every year for a number of years and getting a flock risk Level

from 1 to 5, in the same way as cattle. The challenge with this scheme in my eyes at the moment is the replacement policy requirements. ALL replacements must be from a flock of the same, or better status, so might prove challenging. Buying in from Non Accredited sources is permitted but requires additional testing, which will make this expensive.

There is a Monitoring Scheme for Johne's too, again designed to give a lesser degree of confidence that infection is at a very low level. Like the MV Scheme it involves testing some thin cull ewes. It is worth saying at this point that there is a highly effective vaccine against Johne's that is used when the disease is present as a route to eradication. However, it could also be used as a marketing tool to sell breeding stock vaccinated against Johne's, as an alternative to freedom from. This might be more useful if the buyer sources from multiple farms of unknown status.

CLA

CLA or Caseous Lymphadenitis, causes wasting and poor production in sheep and has economic importance in many countries worldwide. There is a Health Scheme that certifies freedom from this disease.

OPA

OPA, or Ovine Pulmonary Adenocarcinoma, or Jaagsiekte, is another disease that causes wasting and poor performance. It is caused by a virus that forms tumours in the lungs, which eventually cause the sheep to show signs of pneumonia. It is difficult to diagnose in the live animal, there being currently no accurate blood test. Ultrasound scanning of lungs can help identify infected animals but it is reasonably variable in finding early infected animals with small tumours in the lungs. However, this is realistically the

only tool we have in helping to reduce the infection rate in flocks. There is no vaccine available for this disease and no cure

Summary

These diseases are important from a flock production perspective, and a discussion with your vet if you suspect your sheep aren't performing as well as you expect them to, is the starting point for identifying which, if any, is behind it. However, most if not all of these diseases are mentioned on export paperwork to Northern Ireland, with vets being asked to certify if these diseases are present in the flocks of origin.

Hope this gives a brief outline of some of the important diseases which could affect our ability to market our Leicesters, whether it be Health Schemes or testing, or vaccines that can help improve or maintain the health status of our flocks, this should give you food for thought.

