Preliminary Outbreak Assessment

Equine Infectious Anaemia in Germany

5th July 2017

Ref: VITT/1200 EIA in DE and NL

Disease Report

Germany has reported seven outbreaks (affecting a total of 11 horses) of EIA: one in North Rhine Westphalia involving three horses out of 57, three in Hamburg in a small cluster (three horses out of 35), one in Bavaria (three out of 43 horses) and two in Lower Saxony (two horses out of 33) (OIE, 2017a and b). In all cases the infected horses have been humanely destroyed. The initial report was made at the beginning of June, in Lower Saxony, when a horse tested positive on pre-export tests. Epidemiological investigations revealed the other cases and investigations are still ongoing. Two of the outbreaks in Hamburg were associated with the purchase of animals and one (in Lower Saxony) was directly linked to the other outbreak in the same region. The Netherlands has also reported a case, again linked to the German cases (OIE, 2017c). Investigations into the other outbreaks are ongoing. Disease control measures have been put in place on the remaining horses present on the holdings and the holdings are currently under restriction. The horses must now test negative twice 90 days apart, after which restrictions can be lifted.
Situation Assessment

We understand that so far, all the horses testing positive in Germany and Netherlands are linked to the import from Argentina of a consignment of polo ponies. Other consignments are under investigation. Under EU legislation (93/197/EEC) horses entering the EU on a permanent basis for breeding and production must originate from a premises where no EIA has been detected or any infected animals were culled and all remaining equidae test negative twice three months apart and when the animals have all tested negative 21 days prior to travel. For horses entering for competition (a temporary certificate, valid for three months, under 92/260/EEC), the requirements are the same but a test at 30 days prior to movement is required. In the OIE code for international trade, the requirements are a test at 30 days prior to import for permanent imports and 90 days prior for temporary imports. Once the horses have entered the EU on a permanent or temporary basis, they are in free circulation within and between Member States, in accordance with EU rules, which do not require further testing for EIA. On arrival at a Border Inspection Post all animals will receive a document, identity and physical check, but there are no longer any requirements for sampling unless there are compliance issues.

The internationally recognised trade test is the Coggins test, which is a serological test using immune-diffusion against a positive antiserum. It relies on reading the test after 24 to 48 hours and has high test sensitivity according to the OIE terrestrial manual. However horses in the early stages of infection may not give a positive reaction and suspect cases that initially test negative should be retested 3 – 4 weeks later (OIE, 2013).

Equine infectious anaemia is reported periodically in equidae in Western Europe. It is a disease which can remain clinically “silent” in infected horses for several years and then may be detected as a result of the horse being stressed, having concurrent disease or being tested for routine surveillance. The disease is slow spreading and occurs through sexual contact, iatrogenic contact (using surgical equipment without appropriate disinfection, infected blood products etc.) and rarely (in countries with low numbers of biting flies) through mechanical vector transmission. Only a small proportion of infected equidae show clinical signs, and those signs can be mild and mistaken for other conditions.

According to Traces, the EU electronic trade notification system, there have been several consignments of equidae from Argentina entering the UK through various Border Inspection Posts in UK, Germany, Netherlands and Belgium in the last two months. Of those, some, but not all were post import tested on arrival at the EU border for EIA. We are liaising with the authorities in Netherlands and Germany to consider any necessary actions for the UK.

Conclusion

The last outbreak of EIA in the UK was in 2012, when horses known to have originated in Romania several years previously, had tested positive. There was no spread from these
cases during the residency period in the UK, despite the presence of biting flies being likely during those five years. We currently consider there is a medium risk that we may detect a case of EIA in the UK at any time and notwithstanding these latest cases in Germany and Netherlands. This reflects the lack of routine surveillance and the non-specific nature of clinical signs for EIA, particularly with respect to the non-competition and non-thoroughbred horse population. For our high value, competition horses there is generally a higher level of awareness of the clinical signs and requirement to report disease among keepers.

This is a timely event to remind keepers of horses and other equidae that the infection can remain subclinical for several years and recent imports are not necessarily the only animals which could test positive. It is therefore important to be aware of all the clinical signs of EIA and other notifiable diseases of horses and to promptly report suspicions of disease to a veterinary surgeon. The Horse Racing Betting & Levy Board Codes of Practice have further information about what to do if disease is suspected (HBLB, 2017).

We will continue to report on the situation as regular updates or if significant changes in the epidemiology of the disease occur.

Authors
Sam Wright
Dr Helen Roberts

References