

Preliminary Outbreak Assessment

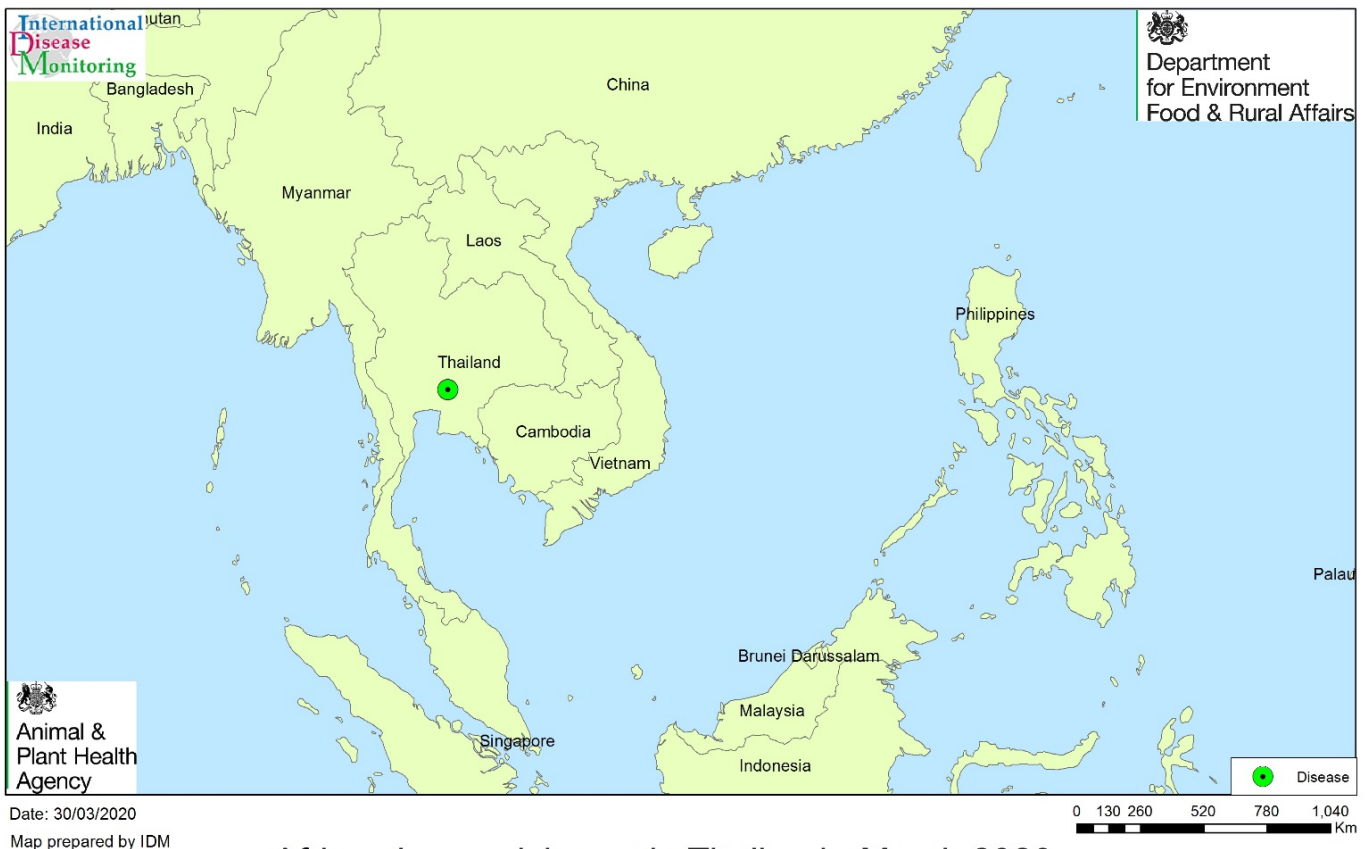
African Horse Sickness in Thailand

31 March 2020

Ref: VITT/1200 African Horse Sickness, Thailand

Disease report

Thailand reported an outbreak of African Horse Sickness (AHS) on 27 March, in horses from multiple barns across the district of Pak Chong, in the north eastern region of the country. This is the first time that AHS has been confirmed in Thailand, a country which has OIE official free status for AHS and is on the approved list for exports of equines to the EU.



African horse sickness in Thailand - March 2020

Situation assessment

The Thai authorities reported that out of 341 horses, 62 were infected and 42 died. Unofficial sources report these to be race horses. The source of virus is not currently known, although epidemiological investigation is ongoing and samples have been taken for serotyping. There are at least nine different strains of AHS, with different geographical distribution, therefore strain identification may point to the region where virus originated. All movements of equids within 150km of the outbreak have been restricted and guidance on improving biosecurity, is being communicated (HorseTalk, 2020). Nearby countries are also improving awareness amongst equine owners and making recommendations for increased biosecurity and vigilance (NST, 2020).

African Horse Sickness (AHS) is a vector-borne viral disease, affecting all species of equidae; it has never occurred in the UK and the UK has OIE official free status. AHS is transmitted by certain species of midges, most commonly *Culicoides imicola* (which is usually restricted to the southern parts of Europe, but otherwise found throughout Africa and Asia). Other possible vectors include *C.brevitarsis*, *C.sonorensis* and *C.obsoletus* (present in the UK) (Mellor and Hamblin, 2004).

AHS is endemic in sub-Saharan Africa, but historically outbreaks of AHS have been reported outside this region, in the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, the Middle East, Cyprus, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. The disease, however, has not persisted in these areas. The severity of clinical signs depends upon the virus strain and host species. The fatality rate in horses can reach 90% in epidemics, but is less in mules and donkeys. Zebra usually do not show clinical signs, but act as reservoirs of infection. Virus circulation is usually seasonal and associated with hot and humid weather and abundance of the arthropod vectors. Commercial vaccines against AHS are available, but are not approved for use in the EU.

This is Thailand's first reported case of AHS. Thailand has OIE official free status, and is approved to export registered and breeding horses to Europe as a Group C country (Commission Decision 93/197/EEC) and re-entry following temporary admission for competitions (Commission Decision 93/195/EEC). The export certificate requires that entry is only allowed from areas that are free of AHS.

Based on a search of the Trade Control and Expert System (TRACES), there have been no equines imported to the UK from Thailand since December 2019. Tracings activities are currently underway for two horses imported into the UK from Malaysia on 7 March and their owners have been advised to place the horses under vector control measures until investigations are complete. Both horses are healthy. This is purely a precautionary measure until more information on the origin of virus and how long it has been circulating in Thailand is known.

Conclusion

The import requirements for equidae into the EU do not allow the direct movement from countries where AHS is endemic. Therefore, the risk through legal trade from these areas is considered to be negligible. When AHS jumps to a new region outside the endemic areas, because case fatality is usually high in a naïve population, we would expect reporting to be swift and any recent imports to be notified to the EU immediately.

The likelihood of importing a horse incubating AHS from an area which has recently reported disease and which is approved for export into the UK is therefore considered very low. The unknown geographical distribution in SE Asia at this point in time may also be impacted by the strain on veterinary service caused by African swine fever and the COVID-19 restrictions. We will review the situation when more information becomes known.

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References

All disease reports are available from the OIE WAHIS database.

Horse Talk (2020) <https://www.horsetalk.co.nz/2020/03/29/african-horse-sickness-thailand-42-horses-dead/>

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New Straits Times, NST (2020) <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/03/579630/horse-owners-alert-following-african-horse-sickness-outbreak>

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