



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,  
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Department of Agriculture,  
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# Bluetongue Virus Update

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National Disease Control Centre

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## **BTV-3 in England Update: Removal of the Temporary Control Zones (TCZs) as of 19 February 2024**

- On 19 February 2024 the following updates were provided by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in the UK:
  - There are 112 bluetongue cases in England on 64 premises in 3 counties
  - There are 106 cases in cattle and 6 cases in sheep
  - There is still no evidence that bluetongue virus is currently circulating in midges in Great Britain
  - Lifting of the temporary control zones (TCZs) in Kent, Norfolk and parts of Suffolk as of noon on 19 February 2024
  - Higher risk animals including positive pregnant animals, positive entire males and animals waiting to be tested for Bluetongue, will remain under restrictions as well as premises in the zones which have not yet been sampled
- On 10 November 2023, the first case of Bluetongue Virus (BTV-3) was confirmed in a cow in Kent, in the South-East of England.
- Due to the current seasonally vector low period; vector (midge) activity is reduced. Hence, disease control measures initially put in place by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in the UK, have since changed. Positive animals are no longer being culled, and instead are restricted at their current location alongside disease mitigation measures.
- As a result of cases of BTV-3 in England, all moves of ruminants and their germinal products (semen, embryos) from **Great Britain to the island of Ireland will continue to be temporarily suspended**. Movements from Northern Ireland are still permitted subject to all usual conditions.
- The Department undertook tracing and surveillance testing of all cattle and sheep movements from Great Britain into Ireland since 1st October 2023 (prior to the temporary suspension). No Bluetongue positive animals have been identified to date.
- It is critical that **all livestock farmers maintain vigilance** for any suspicions of this disease, and report any such suspicions to their local [Regional Veterinary Office \(RVO\)](#) without delay.

### **Bluetongue situation: Ireland is still in a high-risk period for disease transmission**

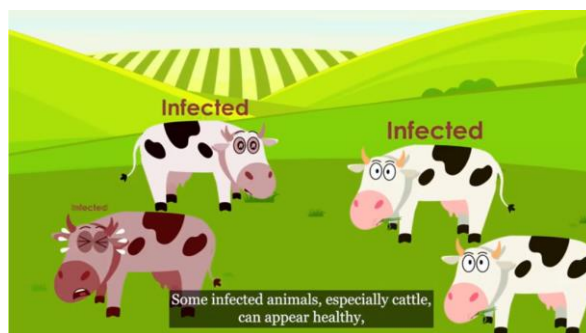
- **Ireland is currently free of Bluetongue virus (BTV)**, which is a viral disease of ruminants and camelids that continues to be of **widespread concern across mainland Europe**.
- **Despite the reduction in vector activity, Ireland is continuing to remain on high alert to the threat of Bluetongue virus entry. Different types (serotypes) of Bluetongue are currently circulating in Europe. Bluetongue serotype 3 (BTV-3) continues to pose a risk in Northern Europe, where outbreaks have been reported over the last few months.**

- Bluetongue virus (BTV) is a notifiable exotic disease that infects ruminant animals (such as sheep, cattle, goats and deer) and camelids (such as llama and alpaca).
- **Bluetongue does not affect human health or food safety. However, if Bluetongue virus entered Ireland it would have serious trade implications for live animals and germinal products.**
- Bluetongue virus is spread by infected **biting midges** (*Culicoides species*) which are present in Ireland and are generally most active between **April and November**.
- The disease could spread to Ireland through **entry of infected animals, infected fetuses or wind dispersal of infected midges** from mainland Europe. The virus can also be transmitted via infected germinal products (semen, ova and embryos).
- There is **currently no EU approved vaccine** against Bluetongue serotype 3 and it is not yet known if other Bluetongue vaccines (BTV-1, 4, 8) can provide cross-protection. EU Member States impacted by BTV-3 are currently awaiting the development of an effective vaccine.

### Situation in Europe (20<sup>th</sup> February 2024)

- **September 2023- February 2024: Netherlands:** total number of confirmed cases of BTV-3 then 5996 (1575 clinical + 4421 PCR positive). Rapid spread since affecting most of the country. The Netherlands report that clinical signs in sheep are currently more severe than in cattle and goats. On some farms mortality rates are over 50%. Several cases have also been confirmed in alpacas. New cases are currently low and maps are not being updated (20/02/24).
- **October 2023- February 2024: Belgium:** 5 outbreaks of BTV-3 confirmed involving 5 individual sheep on 5 farms in Antwerp, close to the border with The Netherlands (Oct-Dec 2023).
- **October 2023- February 2024: Germany:** 32 outbreaks (27 bovine, 5 ovine) of BTV-3 (Updated 20/01/2024). These outbreaks were in the two already affected areas in Länder: Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia.
- **August 2023- February 2024: Spain:** BTV-4 confirmed in cattle and sheep in the North and Centre of the country. BTV-1 detected in 2 sentinel farms in Cádiz (November 2023, previously detected in December 2021). A recent outbreak of BTV-4 was confirmed on 06/02/2024 south of Alicante, with 186 susceptible species. Bluetongue continues to circulate despite a compulsory vaccination program.

Figure 1 Watch a short video on 'How to keep Bluetongue out of Ireland' by clicking [here](#)



[Watch this video to learn more about 'How to keep #Bluetongue out of Ireland'](#)

## Information on Bluetongue

- Bluetongue can affect all ruminant species and camelids. Cattle, sheep, goats, deer, llamas and alpacas are species found in Ireland which could become infected.
- Potential routes of entry into Ireland include:
  - Import of an infected animal (including infected foetuses).
  - Import of infected biological material (e.g. blood) or germinal products (e.g. semen or embryos).
  - Weather conditions allowing for infected biting midges to be carried on the wind to Ireland from Bluetongue affected countries.
- Sheep are more likely to show obvious clinical signs of Bluetongue than cattle if they become infected, and mortality rates can be as high as 70%. Some animals may not show any clinical signs however, and these animals can pose a risk for spreading the disease to new areas or countries.
- Bluetongue virus is spread by infected **biting midges** (*Culicoides species*) which are present in Ireland and are generally most active between **April and November**. Activity levels are dependent on average temperatures, so mild weather conditions may see midge activity persisting for longer.
- The incubation period of Bluetongue virus is approximately 2 weeks.
- Once the virus enters the midge population, eradication is almost impossible.
- A wide range of **clinical signs** are associated with Bluetongue, such as:
  - Fever
  - Inappetence (loss or lack of appetite)
  - Drop in milk yield
  - Reddening of the mucus membranes
  - Sores on the nose, gum and dental pads
  - Swelling of the face, lips and tongue (i.e. "Bluetongue")
  - Breathing difficulties if the tongue swells

- Drooling
  - Discharge from the eyes and/or nose
  - Lameness
  - Abortion or deformities in offspring
  - In severe cases, death can result
- **Images of the clinical signs of bluetongue virus in sheep and cattle can be found [here](#)**
  - Due to the similarities/deformities that can result from Schmallenberg virus and Bluetongue virus in offspring/ aborted fetuses, carcasses submitted for post-mortem to Regional Veterinary laboratories will be tested for Bluetongue virus.
  - Farmers, veterinary practitioners and other relevant stakeholders should remain vigilant for Bluetongue transmission.
  - Bluetongue is a notifiable disease, therefore, any suspicion of disease must be reported to the local [Regional Veterinary Office \(RVO\)](#) without delay.

## **Importers of Bluetongue susceptible species: Key messages to prevent Bluetongue entering Ireland**

1. Instead of purchasing Bluetongue-susceptible animals from mainland Europe, consider if there is another way you can achieve the breed/genetic changes you seek (e.g., via artificial insemination).
  2. If you must purchase live animals from outside Ireland, only do so during times when midges are less active (Dec – Mar).
  3. Only purchase animals, germinal or biological products from reputable sources. Animals from certain countries require vaccination against Bluetongue prior to import: proof of vaccination status should be obtained.
  4. Ensure the animals are Bluetongue virus-free before they leave their country of origin by requesting a pre-movement PCR test for the virus. Although this can give a certain level of assurance, it is important to remember that animals may be harbouring the virus which is not yet detectable by laboratory testing, or they may become infected if bitten by an infected midge *en route*. All susceptible ruminants need to be tested after their arrival to Ireland even if they have had a negative pre-movement test.
  5. Isolate imported animals indoors as soon as they arrive onto your holding and monitor them closely for any signs of illness. Biosecurity advice for farmers importing livestock can be found [here](#)
  6. Ensure all animals arriving from mainland Europe are visited by an RVO vet within 5 days of arrival into Ireland.
- Contact your [local RVO](#) for more information before deciding to import.

## **Further information on Bluetongue**

Please consult the following resources for further information on Bluetongue virus:

- [Dept of Agriculture Food and the Marine website](#)
- [European Commission webpage on Bluetongue](#)
- [Bluetongue - WOAHA - World Organisation for Animal Health](#)

***Please be alert and remain vigilant for Bluetongue transmission if you are involved with ruminant and camelid species.***

**National Disease Control Centre  
20<sup>th</sup> February 2024**