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My Lords,

Thank you for your contributions to the Lord Bishop of St Albans' topical oral question asked on Thursday 14 December 2023 regarding Vector-borne Diseases. During the debate, I promised to write to you on what assessment the Government has made on the recent outbreak of the Bluetongue disease in the south of England. After consulting with officials at the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), I am pleased to provide an update to the House on the cases of Bluetongue that have been found in Kent and Norfolk.

Bluetongue is an exotic notifiable disease of ruminants (cattle, sheep, deer and goats) and camelids (llamas and alpacas). The disease does not infect people and cannot be spread in meat or milk. It is spread by biting midges which are most active in the UK between April and November. Bluetongue can reduce milk yield, cause sickness, and reduce reproductive performance. In the most severe cases, it can cause death in adult animals.

Following routine surveillance, Bluetongue virus serotype 3 (BTV-3) was found in a single cow in Kent on 10 November 2023. Defra and Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) officials took immediate action, humanely culling the animal and putting in place a 10km Temporary Control Zone (TCZ) around the affected premises, whilst a veterinary investigation was carried out to understand the origin of the disease and check for potential spread.

Further surveillance in the Kent TCZ has found additional cases, and so the TCZ has been extended as a precaution to prevent the potential spread of disease. To date, 25 cases (23 in cattle, 2 in sheep) have been found within the Kent TCZ. Routine surveillance in higher risk counties also identified a further two cases of bluetongue in cattle on a farm in Norfolk - a 10km TCZ was declared around the affected premises and the animals were humanely culled to minimise the risk of onward transmission. Subsequent surveillance has identified another 3 cases in cattle in the Norfolk TCZ. This brings the total number of cases in the UK to 30 infected animals on 17 premises in Kent and Norfolk (accurate as of 21 December 2023).

Within the Temporary Control Zones, controls on the movement of live ruminant animals are in place to prevent potential spread of disease, though keepers can apply to APHA for licences to move for most purposes, including for welfare and to slaughter.

This finding of Bluetongue was not unexpected as the virus is present in several European countries and there has been a recent major outbreak of BTV3 in the Netherlands with cases also reported in Germany and Belgium. The current hypothesis is that the source of the disease was one or more plumes of infected midges blown across the Channel from Europe - all of the cases detected in England have been in animals which were homebred and there is no history of imports on these premises. Government routinely completes post-import testing on all animals arriving in GB from countries within 150km of a known outbreak. Any infected animals which arrive into GB will be culled, with no compensation paid, or returned to the country of origin.

There is no evidence that there is current circulating bluetongue virus in the GB midge population. The surveillance, veterinary investigations and epidemiological assessments are on-going. Defra is working closely with industry bodies to ensure that keepers and other businesses are kept up to date, and that arising issues are addressed promptly.

The zones will stay in place at least until we have ascertained if there is any circulating virus and that removing them would not affect disease control or trade. We will review the need for the zones when we have completed surveillance. Larger zones may also be required to facilitate export trade from other parts of the UK.

Defra continues to work with colleagues in UKHSA and DHSC on vector-borne disease as part of the One Health approach. A research programme was announced in April which will improve the UK's research capacity and capability to forecast, understand, mitigate, and avoid animal and human vector-borne disease threats. More information on this research can be found here: [UKRI and Defra invest £7 million to fight vector-borne disease – UKRI](#)

Further information on the rules in disease control zones can be found in our guidance on GOV.UK, with the definitive requirements in the TCZ set out in the declaration for the zone [GOV.UK](#).

I hope that this letter has provided the necessary clarity on the Government's actions surrounding the recent outbreak of the Bluetongue disease. I am copying this letter to all those who contributed and will place a copy in the House library.

With my very best wishes,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Lord Evans', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

LORD EVANS OF RAINOW