Focus On Fluke…

It is prudent to suggest that most producers have an appreciation of whether their livestock are susceptible to liver fluke disease (Fascioliasis), based on geography alone! However, a recent survey of UK and ROI farmers, conducted by Elanco, Moredun Research Institute and National Sheep Association, identified that more needs to be done to improve the control and understanding of the parasite *Fasciola Hepatica* which causes this disease.

Liver fluke can affect all grazing animals, but particularly sheep and cattle and boasts a complex lifecycle including an intermediate host, the mud snail. It is the involvement of this snail that can be responsible for regional variances in incidence rate, whereby wet, muddy, acidic ground is predisposed to higher infection risks…particularly if exacerbated by heavy summer rainfall and poor drainage. During the period May-July 2015 in the South East, temperatures were generally higher with lower than average rainfall, reducing but not removing the overall fluke risk for the forthcoming autumn/winter. Parasite forecasts such as those available on www.nadis.org.uk use meteorological data to predict the prevalence of parasitic disease.

Diagnosis of liver fluke disease can be made in a number of ways, including Faecal Egg Counting - FEC (10 samples of 5g minimum), blood testing, bulk milk sampling, Post Mortem Examinations (PME), and analysis of abattoir kill sheet data where available. Despite annual losses to the industry attributable to *F. hepatica* infection in England estimated at £13-15 million (beef and sheep) and £23 million (cattle) (ADAS, *Economic Impact of Health and Welfare Issues in Beef Cattle and Sheep in England.* Project Report, 2013) and concerns that disease incidence is on the rise, less than 20% of producers questioned were performing Faecal Egg Counting! A survey conducted in 2012 also identified that 77.5% of dairy units in England had demonstrated exposure through positive bulk milk testing (Howell *et al*, 2015.).

Image: Adult Liver Fluke – Source AFBINI

Season, challenge of infected pasture, management practices and withhold period can significantly impact decision making when controlling and treating fluke disease. Did you know that many flukicide products available do not actually have any impact upon the very damaging immature fluke stages? These young stages of fluke are only susceptible to Triclabendazole and can cause significant damage when migrating through the liver following ingestion and can be responsible for acute disease which can often result in dullness, anaemia and death amongst other signs, particularly in sheep. However, most flukicidal drugs are capable of treating chronic fascioliasis as they kill adult fluke, either way knowing the right product to use in the correct manner is critical to managing the problem and not selecting for resistance to the medicines available. These basic principles of Identifying Risk, Treating Appropriately and Avoiding Drug Resistance are fundamental to 'COWS Guidelines - Control of Cattle Parasites Sustainably'.

If you have any concerns regarding fluke control, management or if you're simply unsure whether you have liver fluke parasites on your ground why not just call your vet for more information?

Alex Walters BVSc MBIAC Cert AVP (CHP) MRCVS

Regional Director, Heathfield Practice