

UK faces bluetongue threat as farmers ignore vaccine

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One in four livestock producers are unlikely to vaccinate against bluetongue this year - despite the potentially devastating effects of the disease.

Although more farmers intend to inoculate this year than last, some 30% of beef and dairy producers are prepared to run the risk of leaving animals unprotected.

As a result, vaccination levels are likely to fall far short of the blanket coverage needed to guarantee Britain remains bluetongue-free.

Some 71% of dairy farmers, 65% of beef farmers and 65% of sheep farmers vaccinated in last year, according to a survey for [Merial Animal Health](#).

Of those who did so, the highest percentage were in East Anglia (88%), followed by the south (76%), midlands (61%) and north (48%).

But many farmers found it difficult to assess risks posed by the disease for the coming season and were unsure about vaccinating during 2009.

A bluetongue outbreak can halve milk yields in dairy cows and cause high mortality, abortion and fertility loss in cattle and sheep.

Yet only 70% of sheep and dairy producers said they were preparing to vaccinate this year. The figure is lower for beef, with only 58% of producers intending to do so.

The survey of 150 farmers and 40 vets was conducted last November.

Merial veterinary adviser Brian Rice said most farmers understood that a bluetongue outbreak would result in major financial loss without compensation.

But many producers failed to appreciate the risk posed by the disease to their businesses and the role of vaccination in preventing it from spreading more widely.

"Bluetongue is here to stay and will continue to threaten livestock in the UK," said Mr Rice.

"The disease follows a multi-year cycle, so even if it is not a major problem one year that does not eliminate the need to vaccinate."

Some producers believed the risk of a bluetongue outbreak was so low they didn't need to vaccinate.

Others believed a high uptake of vaccine in the south of England would provide a wall of protection preventing bluetongue from spreading north.