An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara
Department of Agriculture,
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Bluetongue Virus Update

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National Disease Control Centre

Number 1 of 2025

Ireland is now entering a higher risk period for bluetongue

This is due to two main factors:

- Rising summer temperatures make it possible for the virus to replicate and spread, if it were to enter Ireland.
- Bluetongue has spread across most of England, and this increases the risk of infected midges being blown on the wind across the Irish sea in the coming months.

Great Britain will extend the bluetongue restriction zone to cover all of England, effective from 1 July 2025.

- **From 1st July 2025** the restricted zone for bluetongue will be extended to cover all of England, which will result in that within England, movements will be permitted without a bluetongue licence or pre-movement test as per current control measures.

262 of bluetongue serotype 3 (BTV-3) cases have been confirmed in sheep and cattle in Great Britain: 262 during the 2024-2025 vector season.

A single BTV-12 case confirmed in Great Britain during the 2024-2025 vector season (near Kent, England)

- Current Department for Environment Food & Rural affairs (DEFRA) restriction zone encompassing affected areas in Great Britain are detailed in Figure 1. Control measures, including movement restrictions, are in force in the restriction zone.

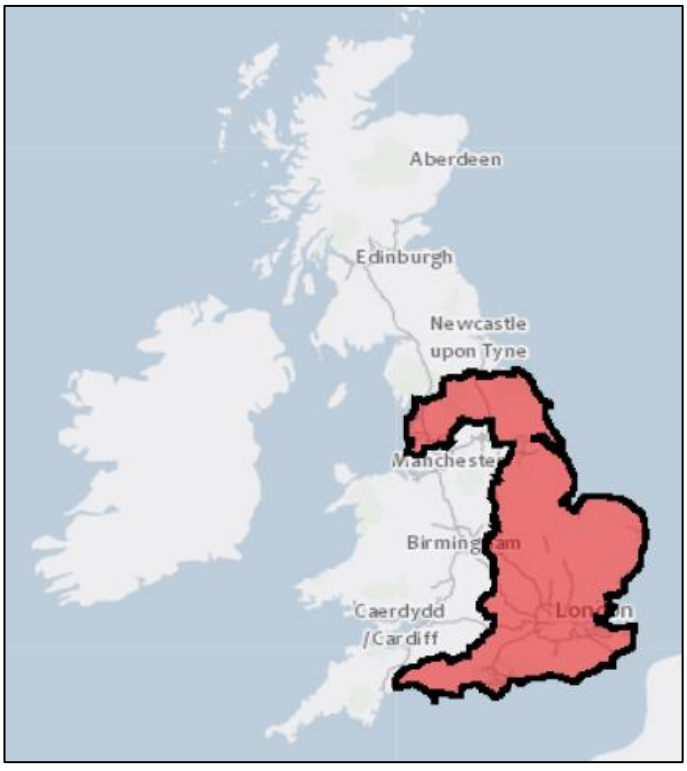

Figure 1 detailing the Bluetongue Control Zone in England (as of 18/05/2025). Map available at [APHA Interactive Bluetongue Virus Map (arcgis.com)]

- **Import of live ruminants from Great Britain to Ireland has remained suspended, due to the inability to meet import certification requirements, since the disease was detected in England in November 2023.**
- Germinal products (semen, embryos) may be imported from Great Britain into Ireland and the rest of the EU once the relevant animal health requirements for BTV can be certified.
- It is IMPORTANT TO NOTE that importing semen from affected countries is not without risk.
- Movements of ruminants and germinal products from **Northern Ireland** are still permitted subject to all usual conditions.

Bluetongue situation and current risks for Ireland

- Bluetongue virus is spread by **infected biting midges** (*Culicoides* species) which are present in Ireland and are generally **most active during warmer months**, between April and November.

- The **risk of bluetongue introduction** in Ireland from infected areas across the Irish sea is currently higher due to increased temperatures, that lead to replication of the virus in the active midges and, weather conditions, that may lead to wind dispersal of these infected midges from France, England or Wales to the east coast of Ireland.

- The risk of introducing infection via imported livestock, semen or embryos remains, despite the controls put in place.

- 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 **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.

Vaccination against BTV-3

- Vaccination against BTV-3 is not currently permitted in Ireland.

- Vaccination for BTV-3 has been **authorised** in Great Britain and other EU countries. Three vaccines have now obtained European Marketing Authorisation for use in exceptional circumstances:
  Syvazul BTV 3 (sheep)
  Bluevac 3 (sheep and cattle)
  Bultavo 3 (sheep and cattle)

- The duration of the immunity period guaranteed in the specifications of these vaccines has not been determined. As a result, **animals vaccinated with the BTV-3 vaccines do not currently meet EU standard certification requirements** and cannot be certified for the purposes of movement to Ireland.

- BTV-3 vaccines do not prevent animals from becoming infected but can reduce the amount of virus circulating in their blood. As a result, the vaccine can help reduce the levels of infection and the severity of clinical signs but may not prevent animals from being a source of onward spread of disease.

- Licenced vaccines are commercially available for Bluetongue serotypes 1, 4 and 8 which can help to facilitate intra-EU movement. Animals from certain countries require vaccination against Bluetongue to meet certification requirements, prior to movement. Proof of vaccination status for all the BTV strains recently circulating in those countries/regions should be obtained.

- There is no authorised vaccine against serotype 12 which means that animals that originate from countries where this serotype is circulating cannot meet the certification requirements and cannot be certified for movement to Ireland.

Situation in Europe (May 2025)

- BTV-3 continues to circulate widely in mainland Europe. Other strains of the disease are also present in several countries such as serotypes BTV-1, 4 and 8 and serotype 12 was detected in the Netherlands with 12 cases in 2024.

- Please see the map below (Figure 2) that shows the areas that remain officially free from bluetongue in light green colour.

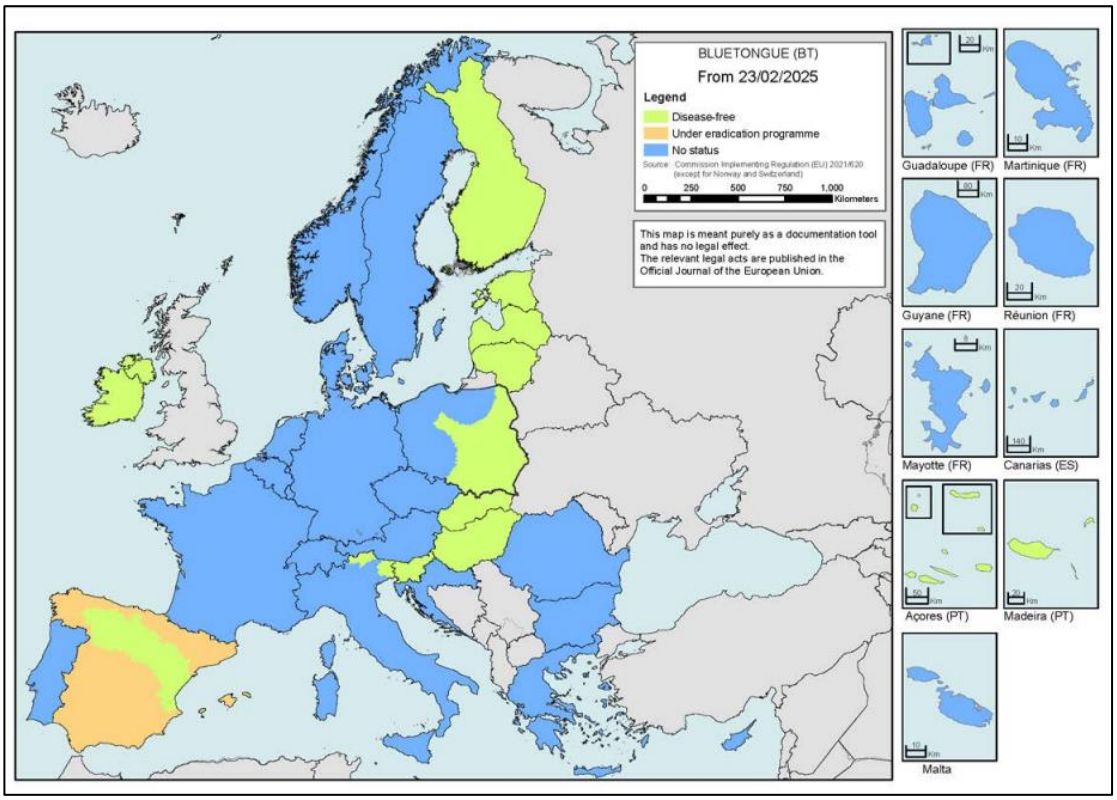

Figure 2 - Map with the Member States and zones with disease status [Bluetongue - European Commission]

Further information on Bluetongue

- Bluetongue is a notifiable exotic disease, caused by bluetongue virus (BTV), that infects ruminant animals (such as sheep, cattle, goats and deer) and camelids (such as llama and alpaca).

- There are different strains of BTV. BTV-3 is the strain currently of most concern, as it is spreading rapidly across mainland Europe and England.

- 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. Midge activity reduces in colder temperatures.

- **Temperature increases result not only in an increase in midge activity, but also the ability for Bluetongue virus to replicate in the midge. Midge activity increases above 4°C. Bluetongue replication can only occur above 12-15°C. Together, these factors can increase the risk of Bluetongue transmission.**

- Sheep are more likely to show obvious and more severe clinical signs of Bluetongue than cattle if they become infected, and mortality rates can reach 30 - 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.

- 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/foetus
    - In severe cases, death can result

  Images of the clinical signs of bluetongue virus in sheep and cattle can be found here

- The incubation period of Bluetongue virus is approximately 1 - 2 weeks although it can vary.

- Once the virus enters the midge population, eradication becomes very difficult requiring very high vaccination uptake levels maintained over a period of several years.

- Due to the similarities/deformities that can result from Schmallenberg virus and Bluetongue virus in offspring/aborted foetuses, foetal carcasses submitted for post-mortem examination to Regional Veterinary Laboratories will be tested for Bluetongue virus. There are no costs to farmers associated with this additional testing.

Key messages for livestock importers to prevent bluetongue entering Ireland

1. The import of live ruminants from Great Britain (GB) to Ireland (IE) remains **suspended**. Germinal products (semen, ova, embryos) may be imported from GB into Ireland once the relevant animal health requirements for bluetongue virus can be certified.

2. The introduction of livestock from other EU member states is permitted only where detailed certification requirements to safeguard against bluetongue can be satisfied. The bluetongue disease situation in Europe is dynamic and there is a real risk of bluetongue virus entry into Ireland.

3. If you are considering purchasing livestock from Europe, there is a risk that animals may not meet certification requirements for entry to Ireland due to disease outbreaks. Importing semen or embryos from affected countries is not without risk. If you purchase livestock in a European country, there is a real risk that by the time you attempt to ship the animals to Ireland, that area may be affected by a bluetongue outbreak in the region and **the animals may not then meet the certification requirements for entry to Ireland**.

4. **The Department will not pay compensation** for any imported animals which subsequently test positive for bluetongue post-entry into Ireland.

5. Three **BTV-3 vaccines** have been authorised for use under emergency measures, but the duration of immunity has not been established for any of them yet, so animals vaccinated with these BTV-3 vaccines **do not currently meet the certification requirements** and cannot be certified by EU member states to allow intra EU movement, including movement to Ireland or for imports from Great Britain.

6. There is **no BTV12** vaccine.

7. Ensure the animals are BTV-free before they leave their country of origin by requesting a premovement 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 premovement test.

8. Upon their arrival in Ireland, immediately isolate the animals indoors in a clean shed, away from the rest of the herd or flock, until all post-entry blood testing has been carried out and results have been received. Ensure that animals have access to clean dry bedding, feed and water and contact your vet without delay if any animals appear unwell.

9. Contact the local RVO immediately once the animals arrive to arrange for the required post-entry checks for diseases including bluetongue. All animals arriving from mainland Europe are to be visited by an RVO vet within 5 days of arrival into Ireland.

10. Post-entry testing requirements:

Two blood sampling are performed on each animal arriving in Ireland, as part of post-entry testing requirements by the RVO. The 1st blood sample is taken within 5 days of arrival to Ireland, and the 2nd sample is taken 10 days after the 1st sample. Any positive results will require immediate action to be taken with appropriate guidance provided by the National Disease Control Centre (NDCC).

Biosecurity advice for farmers importing livestock can be found here
Contact your local RVO for more information before deciding to import.

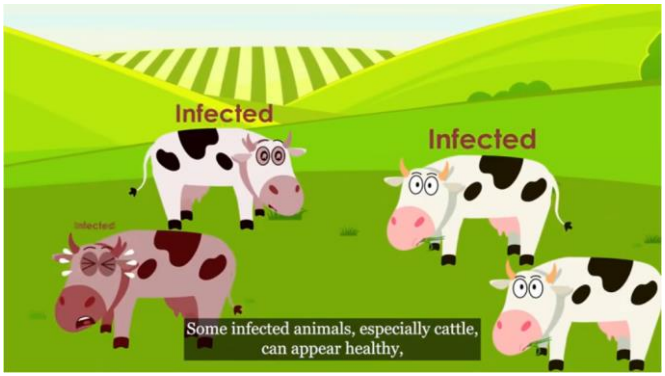

Figure 3 - Watch a short video on 'How to keep Bluetongue out of Ireland' by clicking here

Further online resources on bluetongue

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

- Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine website
- European Commission webpage on Bluetongue
- Bluetongue - WOAH - World Organisation for Animal Health

Please be alert and remain vigilant for signs of bluetongue if you are involved with ruminant and camelid species.

National Disease Control Centre
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