



Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSEs): **The case for the relaxation of sheep controls**

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THE NATIONAL SHEEP ASSOCIATION



**CURRENT TSE CONTROLS
IN SHEEP**

**NSA RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR RELAXATION**

**THE COST OF
CURRENT CONTROLS**

TSE Report

www.nationalsheep.org.uk

TRANSMISSIBLE SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHIES

TSEs are a group of degenerative fatal diseases affecting the brain that include scrapie in sheep and goats, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle and Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (CJD) in humans. Scrapie exists in two similar but unrelated forms: classical and atypical. Classical scrapie is contagious between sheep and occurs most commonly in animals aged between two and five. Atypical scrapie (Nor98) is a spontaneously occurring, sporadic, degenerative brain condition of older sheep and goats (generally over five years of age).

TSE controls in sheep were introduced in the late 1990s due to fears that BSE might cross species from cattle to sheep and BSE from cattle to humans. The practice of feeding meat and bone meal in ruminant rations, and potentially feeding infected material, was also identified as a potential risk to human health and subsequently prohibited, with strict controls set in place.

The similarities between BSE and scrapie characteristics led to theories that BSE might manifest in sheep in the form of scrapie, however the two diseases have been found to be

unrelated. It was discovered possible to infect sheep with BSE in laboratory conditions, but only by feeding fresh infected brains, something that is never practised. Over nine million field samples taken by 2014 across all EU member states have not found a single case of natural transmission of BSE to sheep.

Extensive research has found **no evidence of a human health risk** from ovine TSEs. Scrapie is a long standing and naturally occurring degenerative disease of sheep that is a challenge for sheep productivity rather than any risk to human health. Yet the

requirement to test healthy slaughtered cattle for BSE ceased for all bovine animals born in EU states (except Romania and Bulgaria) from 1st March 2013 without any relaxation of sheep controls.

As BSE testing requirements are being relaxed the rules regarding ovine TSE monitoring, which were originally introduced as a parallel precaution to these requirements, must also be reviewed. These regulatory practices create inconvenience and confusion, are costly to the sheep industry, the Government and the national economy, and undermine confidence in sheep farming.

THE COST OF CURRENT OVINE TSE CONTROLS

Working on the assumption that Specified Risk Material (SRM) might potentially harbour detectable TSE infectivity, Regulation (EC) No. 999/2001 of the European Parliament requires the removal of SRM from the carcasses of sheep slaughtered for human consumption. The spleen and ileum constitute SRM in sheep of all ages, and the skull (including the brain and eyes), the tonsils and the spinal cord must also be removed from sheep aged over twelve months or which have a permanent incisor erupted through the gum.

In the UK the spinal cord must be removed through the process of carcass splitting, in which carcasses are halved lengthways down the vertebral column. The practice of carcass splitting creates considerable cost increase each year, which, according to information gathered by NSA, include:-

Slower slaughter line speeds	£262,000
Cost of checking for teeth in live markets	£646,800
Devaluation of carcasses (lost opportunity)	£22,400,000
Total estimated annual average cost of carcass splitting	£23,308,800

These costs are borne primarily by farmers through reduced carcass values. This situation is particularly

damaging for upland farmers grazing some of our most iconic indigenous breeds. These less favoured upland areas may result in lambs taking longer to reach killing weights, but grazing this type of sheep in less favoured upland areas has environmental, social, health and economic benefits that go beyond the direct farming economy.

This estimate does not include the limitations that carcass splitting places on opportunities for UK sheepmeat exports, or its effect of rendering domestic sheepmeat less competitive against imported products. The UK's strict ovine TSE controls diminish the reputation of and demand for UK meat on the international market by suggesting UK sheep are not healthy

animals which produce safe, high quality meat. The cost of this is difficult to estimate, but stretches in to the millions.

Elsewhere in the EU – notably in France – the spinal cord of older sheep is removed by sucking the SRM from the carcass rather than by carcass splitting. Although this process keeps the carcass whole, it continues to slow down slaughter lines and mark out affected carcasses as older animals. It also requires a capital outlay for the purchase of the necessary equipment, estimated by Eblex at £8-12K per unit. Suction equipment is not reliably able to thoroughly remove all the SRM from a carcass, so adds even more weight to the NSA recommendation that the UK Food Standards Agency stops gold plating the current EU legislation.



NSA RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 The EU Commission should, with urgency, give its attention to the European Food Safety Authority (FSA) report on Scientific Opinion on BSE/ TSE Infectivity in Small Ruminant Tissues** published in 2010 and act on the recommendations it contains, including its suggestions for the improvement of data collection and risk assessment in this area. Read the report at www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/doc/1875.pdf.
- 2 TSE controls for sheep should be relaxed and the practice of carcass splitting ended.** There is no evidence that BSE can be transferred to sheep in non-laboratory conditions; feed controls no longer allow mammalian protein to be fed to ruminants; and there is no evidence of any link between scrapie and degenerative brain disease in cattle or humans. In spite of this, carcass splitting continues to incur huge costs to the sheep industry and reduce the competitiveness of UK sheep meat domestically and on the world market
- 3 As an immediate measure we would recommend one of two alternatives be adopted for determining when carcasses have to be split and SRM removed:-**
 - a) the 12-month age limit for carcass splitting should be interpreted as being the end of June following the year of birth rather than using visible permanent incisor eruption. This would reduce the time and cost of checking for teeth. There is already a precedent for this system of age identification being used for the EID tagging of slaughter lambs;
 - b) or the age at which sheep are required to be split should be increased to 24 months or where a second pair of permanent incisors has emerged. As the earliest onset form of scrapie does not commonly occur until two years of age, the current splitting of carcasses aged twelve months and potentially younger is unnecessary

Either alternative would result in a dramatic fall in the number of lambs being split and would take considerable uncertainty away from farmers, as emergence of the first incisors (which almost always erupt as a pair) is unpredictable and can occur at varying ages and points in development, meaning carcasses which are not older animals are therefore sometimes identified as older and unfairly devalued as a result.
- 4 The Food Standards Agency should cease insisting on 100% SRM removal in UK abattoirs** when other EU Member States only require the removal of as much SRM as possible. The UK is gold plating a European requirement and the burden on abattoirs could be reduced without any changes being made to the law.
- 5 Scrapie testing in sheep** should continue in order to further improve the health status and productivity of sheep.

FURTHER INFORMATION

See the full version of NSA's **Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSEs): The case for the relaxation of sheep controls** report at www.nationalsheep.org.uk/hot-topics

See NSA's **The Complementary Role of Sheep in Less Favoured Areas** report for the full range of benefits provided by sheep grazing in upland areas of the UK.





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