Sheep farmers warned of an early hatch of parasites

SHEEP farmers throughout the UK are being warned to be alert for a ‘mass hatch’ of overwintered parasites as the weather warms up this spring.

The Sustainable Control of Parasites in Sheep (SCOPS) initiative is giving a week-by-week update on the risk posed by Nematodirus battus in different regions of the UK on its website, www.scops.org.uk

In Wales, Farming Connect is warning of an increased risk of earlier N battus infections in young lambs this year. It notes that a rapid change from colder to warmer temperatures increases the risk of infection, and is advising farmers to be vigilant during the current mild spring. It is predicting that infective N battus larvae will hatch on to pastures between two and four weeks earlier than last year. Farming Connect has teamed up with the University of Bristol to use soil temperature information to draw up a table of predicted hatching dates and peak hatching periods for different areas of Wales. The table can be accessed at www.menterabusnes.co.uk/farmingconnect/news/avoiding-the-risk-of-nematodirus-infection-in-young-lambs

‘Farmers should not have a “wait and see” attitude when it comes to Nematodirus,’ says Farming Connect. ‘A large number of immature larvae can cause significant damage, and as they aren’t producing eggs, faecal egg counts may be unreliable. Farmers are advised to act on the basis of risk assessment and the predicted level of challenge from the disease in their area.’

In Scotland, Scotland’s Rural College reported on April 23 that a fatal infection with N battus had already been diagnosed this year in a lamb sent for postmortem examination to the St Boswells veterinary investigation centre. It says that the case reflects the recent rise in spring temperatures, triggering hatching of parasite eggs in some areas.

Risk factors and advice on treatment for nematodirosis is available on the SCOPS website at www.scops.org.uk/alert_pdfs/NematodirusApril201413042014142427.pdf

Sheep farmers are also being warned to watch out for blowfly strike after a farmer near Milton Keynes recently reported the first incident of strike in the region this year. Overwintered blowfly larvae begin to develop in the soil as temperatures rise above 9°C.

Fiona Lovatt, president of the Sheep Veterinary Society, commented: ‘Due to the unpredictability of the UK weather, getting the timing right for treatment of ewes and lambs against blowfly strike can be extremely difficult. The incidence of blowfly strike will rise with the local soil temperature on a farm, and some areas of a farm may be warmer than others. Flies will begin to emerge from overwintered blowfly pupae as the soil temperature rises above 9°C and larvae can mature in as little as three days after the eggs are deposited in the fleece of a susceptible sheep.’

She added: ‘Many do not realise the speed in which blowfly strike can occur, as within days of emerging, adult females lay batches of about 200 eggs onto the sheep’s fleece. If an infestation is missed, then the sheep will suffer for a week or so before dying. Thankfully blowfly strike can easily be prevented but research has shown that there is a very good reason to use treatments early in the year to prevent a build-up of flies and avoid the devastating impact that strike can have on flocks.’