

Scab know-how and control

Sheep scab used to be relatively rare and straightforward to deal with. Now neither are true, and it's important to keep on top of diagnosis and treatment, says vet **Richard Knight**



Richard Knight

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The times have been and gone when sheep scab was a rarity, controlled by a useful piece of legislation. A standard dipping procedure had to be carried out between two set dates and even the local policeman could witness this and certify that it had been done. Those days are in the past, unfortunately, unless private industry partnerships produce a protocol which is complied with by all.

Folk are now at the mercy of their own sense and that of their neighbours – who can't be chosen, unlike our friends.

A SLIP-UP IS COSTLY

There's no doubt that skin conditions in sheep are misdiagnosed, as many are well down the clinical course of the disease by the time veterinary advice is sought. Sheep scab is one of those issues where a slip-up can be costly in terms of lost weight or reduced growth in animals and also wasted treatment costs.

“Boundary fences and walls must be well maintained”

Skin scrapes, with visualisation of the mite *Psoroptes ovis* under a microscope, are required before therapy selection.

Farmers are realistically carrying out either the dipping or the injection option. Injections seem to take longer to work, and 10 days down the line the treatment effect may be brought into question.

Dipping, especially with organo-phosphates, will lead to a dramatic improvement in condition.

Although this is more hassle, and often a longer meat withdrawal, it seems to lead to a more rapid treatment effect.

SCAB MITE MYTHS

There are a few myths around about scab mites too. One is that the mite can live off sheep for a while. This is not true, as the mites need a meal every few hours, so much so that leaving a field

empty for a day or two is a safe gap with regards to eliminating cross-infection.

On the other hand, the mite is highly infectious. A single rogue, infected sheep can spread it to a whole flock even if it comes into contact with them for a few hours or a day.

This is where the importance of farmers' neighbours comes to the fore. If a neighbour buys in sheep of unknown scab status, then boundary fences and walls must be well maintained so that they are thoroughly stock-proof, even to the most adventurous young hill sheep!

Local knowledge of who has what sheep where, and the likelihood of a particular trader being more or less at risk of bringing scab into an area is very handy. Only those that talk and share knowledge will be able to do this, so keep yourselves in the know!

“Skin scrapes are required before therapy selection”

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A single infected sheep can spread scab mites to an entire flock