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Occurrence of Schmallenberg virus in Danish biting midges (Culicoides spp.)

Lasse Dam Rasmussen1, Carsten Kirkeby2, Birgit Kristensen2, Thomas Bruun Rasmussen1, Graham J. Belsham1, René Bødker2, Anette Bøtner1

1DTU National Veterinary Institute, Lindholm, DK-4771 Kalvehave, Denmark 2DTU National Veterinary Institute, DK-1870 Copenhagen, Denmark

In autumn 2011, an unidentified disease of livestock was reported on both sides of the Dutch-German border. Using Metagenomics, the etiological agent of this disease was identified as a novel orthobunyavirus and named Schmallenberg virus (SBV) (1). Other members of this virus genus (e.g., Akabane virus) are widespread in Africa and Asia; both biting midges (Culicoides spp.) and mosquitoes are responsible for the transmission of these viruses. Hence it was a reasonable assumption that European Culicoides species may be responsible for the transmission of SBV within Europe.

The first find of SBV in Danish Culicoides were caught in October 2011 close (6 km) to the German border, and less than 10 km to an SBV-infected sheep farm in Germany (2) (on the map). After this initial finding of two SBV positive pools close to the German border, all other midge pools (approx. 250) tested negative for both SBV and BTV. However, after a thorough investigation of midge pools, it was found that the midges were divided into three groups: Obsoletus group, Pulicaris group and others. Further, the heads and abdomen of the midges were caught in October 2011 close (6 km) to the German border, and less than 10 km to an SBV-infected sheep farm in Germany (2) (on the map). In 2012 investigations were focused on just 4 different areas (I, II, III, IV) where midges were collected on a weekly basis and tested for the presence of SBV and BTV. In 2012, midges were divided into Obsoletus group, Pulicaris group and others. Furthermore, the heads and abdomen of the midges in the Obsoletus group were tested separately.

**Results 2011**

After the initial finding of two SBV positive pools close to the German border, all other midge pools (approx. 250) tested negative for both SBV and BTV.

**Results 2012**

In 2012 collection of Culicoides was focused on four areas. Midge pools were collected on a weekly basis from July 20th in September 19th and divided into the Obsoletus group, the Pulicaris group and "others". Furthermore, the heads and abdomen of the midges in the Obsoletus group were tested separately in pools of 10. The samples were homogenised using a TissueLyser II and RNA was purified by MagNa Pure robot. RT-qPCR was performed using both S2 and L1 primers and probes. Only pools positive in both were considered positive for SBV. The mean Ct values in the tables are from the S3 PCR.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

In 2011, Culicoides containing Schmallenberg virus (SBV) was only found at the most southern location, of 44 catch sites located across the entire country, only 10 km from an infected German farm. In 2012 infected biting midges were found on all of the four catch sites which were all located in large distances from the infected site from 2011, and representing most of Denmark. In other words, the virus has managed to spread to midges in the entire country in just under a year and that without extensive reports of outbreaks. Only a single lamb was found infected with SBV. The Obsoletus group were the most frequent caught and is also responsible for 36 of the 41 positive pools. In total 17% of the unidentified pools were positive for SBV. The mean Ct values in the tables are from the S3 PCR.

**References**