Date 21 December 2011  
Subject Schmallenberg letter

Dear Madam President,

This letter is to inform you of the latest developments concerning the Schmallenberg virus.

**Status**  
The Animal Health Service (*Gezondheidsdienst voor Dieren*, GD) currently knows of 30 sheep farms where malformed lambs have been born. There are also 16 farms that have contacted the GD because they have observed symptoms that could indicate an infection. The farms are distributed throughout the Netherlands (see enclosure). The Central Veterinary Institute (CVI) has since identified the Schmallenberg virus in 13 of the 27 lambs studied. In my letter of 19 December 2011 I informed you of a report of two malformed calves born at one farm. Although the virus was not detected in samples taken from these animals, the Schmallenberg virus cannot be ruled out as a cause. With related viruses, such as the Akabane virus for example, virological tests carried out on malformed calves mainly produce negative results.

**Notification obligation**  
Yesterday, on the basis of the Animal Health and Welfare Act (*Gezondheid- en Welzijnswet voor Dieren*, GWWD), I established a notification obligation for cases of ruminants born with malformations. Farmers are required to report these symptoms to the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (*Nederlandse Voedsel- en Warenautoriteit*, NVWA). The notification obligation entered into force on Tuesday 20 December 2011 at 23:00. The purpose of the notification obligation is to gain a better understanding of the magnitude and the geographical spread of the problems caused by the Schmallenberg virus. This data is also important for the follow-up research referred to later in this letter. The notification obligation also applies to veterinarians and persons working in research institutes. The implementation of the notification obligation will be dealt with further by the relevant organisations. After the notification obligation entered into force, three reports were received from Echt, Heerlen and Scheerwolde. The NVWA will publish a map showing the locations of the farms that have reported cases to the GD or NVWA since 1 December 2011.
Zoonotic aspects
The problem of diarrhoea in adult cattle first arose at the weekly early warning meetings for the detection of zoonoses (signaleringsoverleg-zoönosen, SOZ) on 5 September 2011, and has been on the SOZ agenda several times since. There have been no reports of human cases that could be related. Since the first reports of diarrhoea came to light, there has been contact between veterinary institutes and the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, RIVM).

Following the discovery of the Schmallenberg virus in sick cattle in Germany, the CVI has, in consultation with its German counterpart research institute in Germany, started to conduct research in the Netherlands, and the RIVM Centre for Infectious Disease Control (Centrum Infectiebestrijding, CIb) has sought contact with the same institute to assess possible risks to public health. In December the Schmallenberg virus cases detected in Germany were discussed at the SOZ. No evidence of zoonoses was found.

The GD informed RIVM that the virus has been detected in cattle in the Netherlands, and that it was possibly the cause of the malformations observed in lambs. CIb has carried out an assessment of the potential risks to human health in cooperation with external and international experts. The CIb has also been invited to participate in consultations led by the Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) on potential public risks and joint communication activities.

Based on all the available information, experts conclude that the transmission of the virus to humans cannot be excluded but is highly unlikely. The RIVM has placed the results of the analysis, which is of a highly technical nature, on its website.

It is ultimately the case that the viruses that the Schmallenberg virus most closely resembles are not zoonoses, and that means it is highly likely that the Schmallenberg virus is not zoonotic either. Furthermore, no symptoms in humans have been detected, even in the months of September and October when there were many cases of sick cattle. Assessments indicate that the virus is transmitted by insects (other similar viruses are also transmitted by insects). As it is now winter, the likelihood that the virus will spread further via this route is minimal. The risk of exposure to the virus during birth or abortion of the affected lambs is unknown. As a result, farmers, veterinarians and other people who experience unusual health problems and have come into direct contact with affected animals are asked to contact their local Public Health Department (Gemeentelijke Gezondheidsdienst, GGD).

As a precaution the CIb will continue to follow developments closely. As is always the case, it is recommended that the usual hygiene measures are followed after coming into direct contact with animals (such as washing hands after touching animals).

Measures
The symptoms that are now being observed are the result of an infection that already occurred several months ago. The most important transmission route of the virus family to which the Schmallenberg virus belongs is via vectors (midges). At this time of year the vectors are no longer active. Further research will be carried out into other possible transmission routes.
In view of the above, and the fact that the zoonotic risk has been assessed as low, there is currently no need for drastic measures such as the culling of animals that are sick or suspected to have the virus. If there are indications of other transmission routes and/or a zoonotic risk, then the Outbreak Management Team Zoonoses (OMT-Z) and the Executive Board for Zoonoses Coordination (Bestuurslijk Afstemmingsoverleg Zoonosen, BAO-Z) will issue a recommendation about appropriate control measures.

**Vaccine and Knowledge Development**

As I have indicated, there is still a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the Schmallenberg virus. I have therefore made every effort to ensure that supplementary research is carried out. In consultation with the relevant research institutes, the GD, CVI and the RIVM, I have established four key areas: the development of diagnostics, vaccine development, epidemiology and the characterisation of the virus.

When structuring research activities, in relation to the exchange of research material for example, optimal efforts will be made in the area of cooperation with human health institutes and with affiliated foreign research institutes in Germany for instance. These efforts should result in: a) the availability of specific diagnostic tests that can be quickly conducted and which indicate antibodies against the virus, b) greater insight into the possible infection routes and the spreading mechanisms of the virus, c) the ability to characterise the virus and gain insight into the possible relationship with other viruses within and between species and d) the availability of a vaccine.

Every effort will be made to develop a vaccine in cooperation with research institutes and the pharmaceutical industry in both the Netherlands and in Germany. Nevertheless, we should realise that there is a chance that this vaccine may not be available before the midge season next year.

**International) information**

In addition to the intensive contacts with the relevant departments at national level, there is also close coordination with the European Commission and neighbouring Member States about developments concerning the Schmallenberg virus. At the request of the Commission, the Netherlands will together with German colleagues provide a status report during the “Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health” (SCOFCAH) of the European Commission on the actions taken. This will also provide international colleagues with the opportunity to exchange ideas.

I have asked Commissioner Dalli to address this issue at European level, including the introduction of a notification obligation at EU level, vaccine development and research. I have also asked him to monitor this new disease at the European level and to discuss measures at staff and at Council level.

I will keep your House informed of further developments.

Yours sincerely,

Henk Bleker
Minister for Agriculture and Foreign Trade