Date 30 December 2011
Re Schmallenberg Virus Developments

Dear Madam President,

Further to my letter of 21 December 2011, I would like to inform you of the latest developments concerning the Schmallenberg virus.

Background

Since 1 December 2011 a new veterinary disease has been identified in the Netherlands which causes congenital malformations in lambs. This has occurred on sheep farms throughout the Netherlands. Most lambs were born dead and those born alive were not viable. On 15 December 2011 the Schmallenberg virus was established as the cause. The virus also caused the cases of severe diarrhoea, fever and reduced milk production that were detected in cattle earlier this year on farms in both the Netherlands and Germany. The Schmallenberg virus is a new virus of the orthobunyavirus family. The virus is likely to be spread by insects like midges (culicoides spp), in the same way as similar viruses like the exotic Akabane virus.

On 20 December 2011 I imposed compulsory notification for livestock producers and veterinarians in order to obtain better insight into the magnitude and spread of the problems caused by the Schmallenberg virus. These parties are now required to report malformations in newborn ruminants to the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA).

Notifications in the Netherlands

Up to 30 December 2011 108 farms have reported symptoms that could indicate infection with the Schmallenberg virus. They related to 67 sheep farms, 40 cattle farms and 1 goat farm. Thirty-seven sheep and 16 cattle farms have been investigated. The virus was confirmed on 27 sheep farms, and studies are continuing on the other 55 farms.

The fact that the virus has not been confirmed at 26 other farms does not however mean that the Schmallenberg virus can be ruled out as a cause, as the actual infection occurs at an earlier stage of the pregnancy. A virus antibody test, which would provide confirmation, is being developed. It is likely that the number of farms affected by the virus will rise when the virus antibody test results become
available. On my instructions the NVWA is maintaining a list of notifications on their website.

**Situation in Europe**

In Germany the virus has now been detected in a malformed calf and in Belgium 5 sheep farms in Flanders have tested positive for the virus. The Chief Veterinary Officers of France, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom have indicated that no malformations have been reported to them, but that they are monitoring the situation closely. As yet only the Netherlands has introduced obligatory notification. This means it is likely that the Netherlands has the best insight into the current status of the disease.

**Public health**

The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (RIVM) has analysed the potential risk to public health. On the basis of all available information the experts concluded on 21 December 2011 that transmission of the virus to humans cannot be excluded, but is highly unlikely. This analysis has now been adopted by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). The Ministry of Health Welfare and Sport and the RIVM are monitoring the situation closely and are closely involved in the follow-up studies. Farmers, veterinarians and others who have had direct contact with animals born with malformations have been asked to contact the Municipal Health Services in the event of unusual symptoms.

**Research**

The symptoms we are now seeing are the result of an infection which is likely to have taken place several months ago. This therefore greatly limits the options for prevention and control. In addition the virus has not yet been isolated and little is known about the introduction, infection and route of spread of the virus. I have therefore invested fully in scientific follow-up studies in the areas of diagnosis (demonstration of antibodies), epidemiology (introduction and spread) vaccine development and virus characterisation. The researchers from the Animal Health Service (GD), the Central Veterinary Institute (CVI) and the RIVM have already started carrying out this research, in close consultation with their German colleagues. I have also asked European Commissioner Dalli to support this research at European level.

**International information exchange**

As we now see from the reports from Germany and Belgium, this issue not only affects the Netherlands. As I said earlier, for this reason my Ministry is maintaining close contact with the European Commission and other Member States. The developments around the Schmallenberg virus have therefore been placed on the agenda of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health of 11 January 2012 in Brussels.

I will continue to keep your House informed of further developments.

Yours sincerely,

Henk Bleker
Minister for Agriculture and Foreign Trade

Datum
30 December 2011