Viral Haemorrhagic Disease

There have been eight outbreaks of VHD reported to the British Rabbit Council Office by Members since the autumn. This is an increase in reports compared to the previous three years. Only one Member has had an autopsy and lab tests undertaken after contacting DEFRA, which confirmed that the virus has changed and that this strain is RHD-2. The VHD virus, like all others e.g. flu, has the ability to change over time, and this strain is widespread throughout Europe.

Unfortunately the current vaccine available is not offering protection against this strain; however steps are being taken to import effective vaccines from Europe as soon as possible. Protection after vaccination with earlier VHD vaccines is at its most effective for only four months and meat producers abroad are vaccinating their breeding animals every four months.

It is vital, if the Fancy is to continue, that any Member who loses more than one rabbit suddenly or unexpectedly, seeks advice and contacts the British Rabbit Council Office. Those affected have lost significant numbers of rabbits. Only one Exhibitor is known to be likely to have contacted the disease at a show, resulting in the loss of more than one hundred rabbits. One Member has lost his entire stud.

What do we know about VHD?

It is a viral disease of rapid onset resulting in sudden and unexpected deaths. The rabbit may have been eating, drinking and behaving quite normally when last observed. There may be no outward sign of the cause of death. Occasionally a rabbit may be heard to scream before dying suddenly, probably as a result of pain related to internal bleeding. Spread to other rabbits is rapid, resulting in multiple deaths. It appears that some breeds are more likely to be affected than others and deaths may continue for several weeks. The virus is airborne and can also be carried by mice, rats and birds. Good husbandry is therefore important; to ensure that you’re setting is protected to prevent access.

Good ventilation is important for the health of your animals. Many Members have wire at the windows to prevent vermin or predators and the addition of a fly mesh will prevent access by insects.

During a known outbreak it is sensible for all Members to stop the introduction of new rabbits to their setting. At all times any new rabbits should be quarantined, away from your rabbits and be fed and watered after your own rabbits. If you are continuing to exhibit, ensure that you do not handle rabbits left at home before washing your hands thoroughly and changing your clothes. It is believed that the virus can be carried on clothing and shoes so footwear should also be changed and disinfected.

The Governing Body are watching the current outbreak carefully. Only Shows in affected areas are considered a major risk. Should this situation change, an announcement will be made immediately. It is essential that all Members are aware and vigilant; please do not attend a Show nor another Members premises if you may be putting them at risk. Any Member with a suspected and/or confirmed outbreak must inform the British Rabbit Council Office and must not
have any physical contact with other Members. Sadly you may not attend any shows, exhibit any rabbits or visit other fanciers for a period of four months after the last reported death. This will have a huge impact and the effects should not be underestimated.

Members affected in previous years have been able to rebuild their stud with the support of other Members and been able to use animals unaffected by the virus. At this time we do not know how or why some unvaccinated animals are not affected but it must be assumed that they, like some people, have a stronger immune system and/or have developed a resistance to the virus.

The British Rabbit Council will continue to use the Website and Facebook pages to post notifications of suspected and/or confirmed outbreaks and any local show cancellations.

Animal Health, Welfare and Legislation Sub-Committee