

Negligible risks to humans from new animal virus: OIE

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The Schmallenberg virus that infected animals in five European countries and prompted Russia to ban some livestock imports from these countries poses negligible risks to humans, the world animal health body OIE said on Thursday.

The virus, named after the German town where it was first discovered in November, has infected cattle, sheep, and goats in Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, causing birth defects in offspring including deformation of the head, neck and limbs.

"Based on current available information, experts concluded that the risk for human health is negligible," the OIE, or World Organization for Animal Health, said in a statement.

In terms of trade, the experts who had been asked to review existing knowledge on the virus that emerged in the second half of last year, concluded that there were also only negligible risks of disease spreading from trade in meat and milk.

The assessment was not as clear-cut for semen, embryos and live animals for which the experts detailed some technical trade recommendations on the OIE website.

It stressed the period during which the Schmallenberg virus circulates in the bloodstream of infected animals was short.

Russia suspended livestock imports from Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Britain because of the outbreak of the Schmallenberg virus.

The European Union's food safety watchdog EFSA is also assessing the health risks posed by the virus and is due to provide the European Commission and EU governments with likely scenarios on how the virus -- borne by insects such as ticks, midges and biting flies -- could affect livestock and potentially human health in the coming months.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency said last week it is "closely monitoring" the emergence of the virus.

Canada doesn't currently allow live cattle, sheep or goats to be imported from Europe, and "based on what is known about this virus, and what we know about similar viruses, there does not appear to be any immediate danger to Canadian livestock," the agency said.

CFIA said it will work with U.S. officials to gather information and will also seek input from provincial governments and the livestock industry.

-- With files from *AGCanada.com*.