

# March 2026 NEWSLETTER

## Welcome

### STRAW BASED DIETS FOR SUCKLER COWS



With a shortage of hay and silage due to the dry summer last year, straw is now often the main part of the suckler cows ration over winter. While straw-based diets can be successful, they are low in energy and protein and very deficient in minerals so must be handled with care to prevent straw impaction. Straw impaction occurs when the diet isn't supplemented with sufficient protein and fermentable energy to feed the rumen bacteria. This then prevents the fibre from being broken so it then blocks the abomasum and omasum which in some cases can lead to rupture and death.

#### What to consider when feeding a straw based diet

1. **Ensure the overall diet contains more than 9% crude protein (CP).** Straw typically contains 3.5% CP so if fed alone, it won't provide enough protein. Good sources of rumen degradable protein include rapeseed meal, distillers' grains, pot ale syrup and urea (though urea has no energy value so would also need an energy source such as barley) There are also high protein (urea based) liquid molasses products available.
2. **Mineral Supplementation.** Straw is also very low in essential minerals such as calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, and trace elements like copper and selenium. Add in a high-quality mineral to prevent any deficiencies that could affect the cow during her pregnancy and the transition after calving as well as cause problems in the calves.
3. **A straw diet should only be considered up to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy.** A pregnant suckler cow needs to be fed to maintain both her own requirements and the growing calf so the diet is only suitable for cows with a BCS of 3.0 and above and before the last two months of pregnancy. BCS should be monitored throughout and if it drops below 2.5, additional forage or concentrates should be added to maintain the correct BCS.
4. **Ensure a smooth transition 8 weeks prior to calving.** In the last trimester, the energy and protein needs of the calf increases rapidly so the diet needs to meet these demands. Look to introduce silage alongside straw as calving approaches for a smoother dietary transition, especially if they will be on silage post calving.
5. **Ensure the straw is clean and palatable.** All cows need to have equal access to the straw, the additional protein source and minerals so make sure you have enough space at the feed barrier or that a ring feeder can be accessed from all sides. Straw is also very dry, so a good, clean water supply is essential.

Clinical signs of straw impaction can include loss of appetite, decreased rumination, very solid dry faeces, distended abdomen and dehydration leading to depression and weakness. Depending on the level of impaction, supportive treatment or surgery isn't always successful so prevention is key. If you have any concerns or questions, please contact the office and speak to one of the vets for further advice.

#### Jessica is running a half marathon!

In April, Jessica is running a half marathon, raising money on behalf of VetPartners for the World Land Trust, which does great work across the world. If you would like to donate, it would be greatly appreciated. JustGiving link:

[Jessica Swiestowska is fundraising for World Land Trust](#)

#### Bluetongue Update

The APHA have recorded **256 bluetongue cases** this season (start July 25), with the vast majority caused by BTV-3, and new detections continuing through January 2026 across counties including Cheshire, Kent, Staffordshire and Devon. As last year, we're expecting midges to become active again in spring, with the risk of renewed spread remaining a concern. Warmer temperatures typically support midge movement, and government updates highlight ongoing circulation in several regions, signalling the likelihood of further cases as the 2026 vector season begins.

Please remain vigilant to unexpected symptoms or unusual losses at lambing/calving. Fortunately, many herds and flocks vaccinated last year, and vaccination continues to be an important control tool. Please speak to your vet about vaccination availability and timing.

#### Red Tractor Reminder

In 2025, a rule change stated that Dairy Farms must have at least one person having completed a medicines administration course within the last 5 years.



## Managing Orf in the Flock – Practical Lessons from a Recent Case

Contagious pustular dermatitis — more commonly known as orf — is a common and frustrating infectious skin condition in sheep. A recent case in a group of 70 mixed-breed lowland ewes highlights practical management options and key decision points for farmers.

### **The Case (by Dr Emily Collins-Wingate BVMSci MRCVS)**

Around half the group developed scab-like, proliferative lesions on the lips, nostrils and muzzle over 7–10 days. Some cases were mild and resolved quickly, while others progressed to more extensive crusting. Importantly, affected sheep remained bright, eating well, and showed no signs of systemic illness.

Based on clinical signs and discussion with the farmer, a presumptive diagnosis of orf was made. The disease is caused by a parapoxvirus and typically affects the mouth and nose, and occasionally the teats of ewes.

### **What We Know About Orf**

Orf is highly contagious, **often affecting more than 50% of the sheep in an infected flock**. Although generally self-limiting over 6–8 weeks, it spreads quickly through direct contact and contaminated equipment or fencing. The virus can persist in dried scabs in the environment for prolonged periods.

**Orf is also a zoonosis, so gloves and protective clothing are essential** when handling affected sheep.

While mortality is usually low, the financial impact can be considerable due to reduced lamb growth rates, mastitis, labour input and potential secondary infections.

### **Treatment Decisions**

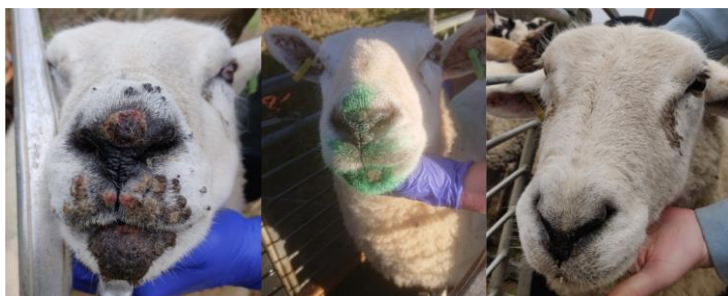
In this case, approximately 80% of the group developed lesions, but there was no evidence of secondary bacterial infection. As orf is viral, **antibiotics** were not justified. Responsible antimicrobial use is essential, and treatment should be reserved **for cases with clear signs of bacterial involvement**.

### **Using a Physical Barrier Approach**

Instead of antibiotics, a natural bioresin gel complexed with zinc salts (NoBACZ Zinc Gel Barrier) was applied as a 3 mm layer over lesions using a gloved finger. Around 30% of sheep required a second application after seven days.

Fourteen days after the first application, lesions were reported to be almost completely resolved, with only minor areas of hair loss in a small number of ewes.

NZGB forms a waterproof, non-colonisable barrier over the lesion. This helps protect damaged skin from contamination, reduces the risk of secondary infection, and may limit environmental shedding of infectious scabs — potentially reducing spread within the group.



Although often regarded as self-limiting, orf can have significant welfare and economic consequences. Early recognition and practical management can help reduce the overall impact of an outbreak. Consider isolation of more severely affected animals where feasible. Barrier products can support healing and reduce complications.

If you have concerns about orf or other skin conditions in your flock, please contact the practice for advice.

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