

Ovine Rinderpest Outbreak in Europe: Wait, Wasn't That Eradicated?



By Alex Berezow, PhD — June 22, 2018



Credit: Storyblocks [1]

In 2011, the global public health community declared the eradication of rinderpest, a severe viral disease of cattle. However, today, Bulgaria has announced an [outbreak of ovine rinderpest](#) [2]. What's going on?

They are two different, but closely related, viruses. Thankfully, the type of virus that causes rinderpest in cattle is still gone. But there is another type of rinderpest virus that causes disease in sheep and goats. Other than the fact it is highly contagious and highly lethal, there simply isn't much known about the virus. That's partially because the farmers and ranchers who are most affected by it -- that is, the ones who derive their living from sheep and goats -- live in poor countries.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), [ovine rinderpest](#) [3] was first discovered in 1942 in West Africa. For many years, it largely remained confined to that area. But in recent years, it spread far beyond its putative origin. Today, the disease is found in more than 70 countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Symptoms include fever, diarrhea, breathing problems, dehydration, and weight loss. The FAO estimates that 90% of a flock can be infected, of which 70% could die.

For any farmer -- let alone an impoverished one with a small farm -- that would be a devastating economic loss. Ovine rinderpest does not stop there, however. The journal *Veterinary Record* [4] says the virus can also infect wildlife, such as gazelles and other small ruminants, some of which are threatened or endangered. The authors of the article go on to call for a global program for the eradication of ovine rinderpest.

This is both possible and necessary. It is possible because a [vaccine exists](#) [5], and we know that the cattle version of rinderpest has already been eradicated. It is necessary for two reasons: First and foremost, though the virus only infects animals, it can deal a severe financial blow to the poor, rural people who rely on them to survive. From that perspective, saving sheep and goats is actually a humanitarian mission. Second, we should prevent the virus from further spreading among wildlife.

Unfortunately, Western governments tend not to pay attention to diseases like this until they pop up in Europe or the United States. As we should have learned with Ebola and Zika, that's no longer a viable option.

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Links

[1] https://www.storyblocks.com/stock-image/nubian-goat-bd_0pdsxuwj6gohbwi

[2] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-ppr/bulgaria-reports-first-outbreak-of-ovine-rinderpest-in-eu-idUSKBN1JH21Q>

[3] <http://www.fao.org/gender/insights/detail/en/c/283118/>

[4] <http://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/169/1/10.long>

[5] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20624051>