

# RESULTS PRESENTED AT THE 8<sup>TH</sup> CONFERENCE OF THE EUROPEAN WILDLIFE DISEASE ASSOCIATION – 2-5 OCTOBER 2008, ROVINJ, CROATIA

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## EVIDENCE OF EUROPEAN BROWN HARE SYNDROME IN SOUTHERN BELGIUM

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Since a few years, a decline of European brown hares (*Lepus europaeus*) populations has been reported in some regions of Southern Belgium. Different reasons have been suggested to explain this trend to decline such as major changes in agricultural practices, climatic conditions, increase of predators and/or infectious diseases. In this context, analyses of found dead animals are strategic to determine if infectious diseases may be partly involved in this decline.

In 2007, the Surveillance Network of Wildlife Diseases operating in Wallonia collected 24 hares (21 adults and 3 juveniles less than 2 months old). Animals were found dead or euthanized by hunters for ethic reasons ; the carcasses were frozen before examination. After complete necropsy, livers were systematically tested for European Brown Hare Syndrome virus (EBHSV) by RT-PCR (Dr. G. Le Gall-Reculé, AFSSA, Ploufragan, France). Targeted bacteriologic and parasitologic analyses were also performed according to suggestive gross lesions.

RT-PCR results for EBHS were positive for 4 of the 24 hares tested. The cases concerned 3 adults and one juvenile. All except the juvenile were in good body condition. Gross lesions consisted in mild to severe pulmonary congestion (n = 4), hemorrhagic content in the small intestine (n = 3), discoloration and loss of consistency of the liver (n = 2), hepatic congestion (n = 1) and mild enlargement of the spleen (n = 1). Histopathology was not performed due to the freezing of the carcasses. Five other hares presented lesions suggestive of EBHS (pulmonary congestion or haemorrhages, hepatitis, enlargement of the spleen or the liver and/of haemorrhagic syndrome) but RT-PCR showed negative results for these cases. Since some tissue samples were of poor quality, these negative results could be partly due to the degradation of the viral RNA. Besides EBHS, other pathologies were diagnosed such as pseudotuberculosis, pasteurellosis and coccidiosis.

These preliminary results confirm the presence of EBHS in Southern Belgium but additional data are needed to strengthen the epidemiologic picture of EBHS in hare populations in our country.