

SILVER LINING AFTER OJD OUTBREAK

Western Victorian sheep producer, Gary Wake, thought his business was ruined after his flock tested ovine Johne's disease (OJD) positive back in 2002. Since then, Gary has worked his way back to a healthy, profitable farming business, with an expected 160 stud rams being offered at this year's on-farm sale with a six-point Assurance Based Credit (ABC) score.

The Cavendish property, Wakefield Park, currently supports a combination of cropping, prime lambs and a White Suffolk stud formed in 1989. The annual on-farm ram sale once peaked at 250 head, and was recognised for drawing buyers from across Victoria.

Gary said it was following the October 2002 sale when he received the devastating blow that two ewes had tested OJD positive. Both at the time were condition score four, so were not visibly affected.

"I was absolutely gutted, it was a very emotional time – I thought the business was finished," he said.

"At the time, some sale rams were still on the property awaiting delivery, these sales were cancelled and the proceeds refunded."

In early 2003, extensive surveillance tests confirmed the flock had a low prevalence of infection. Over 230 trace-forward previous sale rams were located and slaughtered on purchasers' properties, with just one found to be OJD positive on a property already heavily infected with the disease.

Gary completed a comprehensive Gudair vaccination programme of his whole flock in December 2002. However, it was too late for the five to six-month-old 2002 ram lambs to be eligible as approved vaccinates, as they had exceeded the 16-week age limit.

"The 2003 sale was cancelled, and as a result, the stud lost a number of clients," he said.

Western Victorian veterinarian, Dr David Rendell, said the only way Gary could continue trading at the time was to achieve an ABC score of three points.

"Abattoir surveillance was the only method available to obtain that third point and get back on the horse."

"Abattoir surveillance during 2004 examined 185 sheep, with all testing negative. So the on-property sale resumed once they had achieved the three points through vaccination, abattoir surveillance and low-risk certification," Dr Rendell said.

Since 2004, abattoir surveillance has been undertaken on up to 700 cull sheep each year, with all testing OJD negative. This means Wakefield Park has now achieved an ABC score of six – made up from whole flock approved vaccinates, abattoir surveillance and low-prevalence certification. This status means the stud is again eligible to resume showing.

"Stud clients now understand that buying rams from a vaccinated flock, backed up by abattoir surveillance, gives them a greater level of assurance than NA (Nil Assurance) flocks. This was reflected at the 2008 sale, which saw a total clearance at a record average price," Gary said.

Prepared for Lorna Citer, June 2010 – available to media as of June 22 2010