

VACCINATION THE KEY TO OJD MANAGEMENT

Vaccination, record keeping, veterinary advice and abattoir surveillance are the weapons of choice for sheep producers preventing and controlling Ovine Johne's Disease (OJD) outbreaks on-farm.

OJD was first diagnosed in Australia in 1980, and spread rapidly across parts of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, infecting 200 farms by 1989. By December 2009, Victoria registered a total of 595 known infected flocks – demonstrating a disturbing 46 percent increase over the past five years alone.

Hamilton farm management consultant and veterinarian, Graham Lean, said the increase of OJD throughout Victoria is very real, and suggests that for every farm that is identified as infected, four or five infected farms remain undetected.

“The problem with this disease is if people don't know they're infected, they don't vaccinate. So there's more and more contaminated farms that keep spreading the disease to other farms by the bucket load,” Graham said.

Graham said the biggest hurdle is that often producers do not realise they are at risk of the disease, and are unaware of the mortality and economic losses they could be facing.

“We've seen losses up to 15 – 20 percent a year. We've seen losses in very young stock on heavily contaminated farms, but on other farms we've seen very light losses”, he said.

“It is an insidious disease, making it likely that there could probably be losses occurring that are larger than what people actually realise.”

A 2005 research project funded by Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) studied 12 southern New South Wales sheep properties over one year. The study found that OJD-related death rates on individual properties ranged between 2.1 percent and 17.5 percent each year, with an annual average death rate of 6.2 percent of the adult flock. This more than doubles the accepted annual mortality rate of 2-3 percent, arising from all causes of death, in Australian sheep flocks.

Graham said the most important thing producers can do to manage OJD is to vaccinate flocks with Gudair before significant deaths occur.

“Certainly our experience over the last 10 years or so with the disease would emphasise that this is absolutely the case. Often significant deaths aren't noticed because the disease presents itself in an insidious way. The light tail of the flock keeps dropping off and this tail keeps developing over time, and sheep die quite readily without farmers really noticing it. It is, on a whole, quite difficult to be aware that some significant losses are taking place,” he said.

As the disease tends to be found in clusters of farms, Graham recommends commencing a vaccination programme as soon as producers suspect their flocks are infected, or when they are aware of infected neighbouring properties or even properties in the same district.

“It takes a long time for the disease to develop from the point-of-infection to clinical expression. So if there are infected sheep farms nearby, then experience would tell us that other farms are susceptible,” he said.

VACCINATION THE KEY TO OJD MANAGEMENT, Add 1

The once-off vaccination works out to be a bit over \$2 per head (ex GST), with government subsidies available to producers who have received a positive OJD diagnosis.

“Victorian flocks can receive subsidies for one year of about 46 cents (ex GST) per sheep, for vaccinating the whole flock. The grant can also be accessed over three years for 93 cents per non-slaughter lamb (ex GST) when only the lambs are vaccinated. So, that’s quite attractive when someone’s initially vaccinating,” Graham said.

An economic analysis performed by Graham Lean and Associates (GLA) for Pfizer Australia, which was based on modelling real farm data from the GLA Farm Benchmarking database to work out the benefits of vaccination, found vaccination programmes to be a significant benefit to specialist wool and prime lamb flocks. The average farm benchmarking client in the GLA database runs nearly 20,000 DSE (Dry Sheep Equivalent), which the economic modelling is based upon.

“For specialist fine wool flocks, the improvement in profitability by vaccinating everything is nearly 60 cents per DSE, run over the whole flock. So if someone has nearly 20,000 DSE, their added profit by vaccinating is going to be about \$12,000. And that’s straight extra profit, without taking into account a premium for approved vaccinates for sale, and the time, stress and labour of cleaning up dead sheep.

“It’s even higher in speciality prime lamb flocks, around \$1 per DSE, which would be nearly \$20,000 over a 20,000 DSE flock.

“Clearly, it’s highly cost effective to vaccinate,” he said.

Graham agrees that abattoir surveillance is also a useful tool of defence for producers.

“It is fantastic on a regional level, but from a producer’s point-of-view, having access to abattoir surveillance can be very positive, because it can give them information on their disease status, not only on OJD, but a number of other diseases.”

Other important management practices urged by Graham include using Sheep Health Statements when purchasing and selling stock, and seeking assistance to help modify farm programmes to help alleviate the impact of the disease.

Graham said that even though there is no way of eradicating OJD, it can be successfully controlled by adopting a rigorous vaccination programme and good farm management practices.

“Unfortunately, there does appear to be some reluctance to vaccinate, given the numbers we’re seeing. It doesn’t make sense that there is reluctance – and I’m not quite sure why farmers aren’t vaccinating. I suspect they just don’t realise how much at-risk their farm is from significant losses.”

-ends-