

VICTORIAN SHEEP PRODUCERS URGED TO GET WITH OJD PROGRAM TO SECURE TRADE

Ovine Johne's disease (OJD) is a serious problem for the Victorian sheep industry—and it's a problem that's not going away. Considering we now know OJD is a manageable disease in already infected flocks, it's hard to understand why producers continue to ignore the warnings, exposing their farms and livelihoods to huge, long-term implications, as they participate in dangerous rounds of Russian roulette.

OJD is regularly described as an insidious disease, which suggests that there are very good reasons to avoid becoming infected. Those who have felt the impact of OJD on their businesses will absolutely agree. Once infected, the insidious nature of this disease enables it to quietly work away in the background, infecting sheep long before the producer is alerted to any problems through notable production losses or significant deaths.

The recent reclassification of OJD prevalence areas in Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia has certainly brought this controversial topic to the surface. Although the decision initially copped some flak from producers and traders, it was a necessary step that industry was obligated to take to keep with the national OJD Management Plan 2007–2012, and to help control the spread of the disease and maintain the integrity of the national assurance system.

What's important for producers to understand is that the changes to prevalence areas will not create a trade barrier, providing producers acknowledge the seriousness of the disease and actively manage the risks in their own operations.

And although there's no treatment for OJD at this stage, there are some good management practices that have proven to be highly effective in parts of Australia. By implementing these practices, producers will be managing the risks for their flocks, while also improving their trading points through the ABC credit scheme. Practices such as:

- Never purchasing sheep unless they come with a Sheep Health Statement (SHS) confirming their health status. The SHS provides useful information on OJD, as well as footrot, lice and ovine brucellosis. It also indicates if sheep are homebred traded—keeping in mind that the more often sheep are traded, the higher risk they pose.
- Always aiming to buy sheep with a higher ABC score than your own flocks to help reduce the chances of introducing OJD to your farm, particularly if you're living in a medium or high prevalence area.
- Vaccinating sheep with Gudair if you're planning on keeping sheep for longer than 12 months (including wethers), or selling them as replacements. Vaccination is most effective when given before sheep have been exposed to the disease, and must always be given to lambs before 16 weeks of age to gain ABC points as Approved Vaccinates.

- Arranging to have your sheep monitored at the abattoir to identify early signs of diseases, including OJD. Abattoir monitoring is also useful in determining the effectiveness your control programs. Although you can gain ABC points this way, it is important to understand that non-detection does not always guarantee an OJD-free status, as some lines of sheep without lesions could still have low levels of infection.

When we're considering the impact of OJD and how it affects the day-to-day running of our individual farming operations, we also need to start thinking strategically about our markets and where we're going as a nation.

Recently in Japan a law was introduced to stop home-grown JD infected animal products entering their internal food chain. As a result, they're effectively cleaning up their own backyard in attempts to eradicate the disease. There could be an expectation that the action taking place in Japan could lead to other trading partners following suit sometime in the future. As Japan currently stands as our number one trading partner for red meat, with over \$2.3 billion worth of Australian beef and sheep meat exported to Japan and Korea during 2009, that's certainly something to think about.

I believe what we need to do in Australia is move away from the social stigma that's associated with OJD. As a nation, we must continue to protect low prevalence areas and slow OJD's spread in southern Australia, where it's well and truly established. Once we recognise the high risk of infection in the south, and its implications, we're in a much better position to manage it.

Vaccinating for OJD is no different to vaccinating for other diseases with 6 in 1, or monitoring for footrot when purchasing sheep. It's just another thing sheep producers should automatically consider. But as a starting point, a new mindset is needed among producers and agents to make much better use of the national Sheep Health Statement and the ABC scheme, to reduce the risk of becoming infected in the first place.

By Kate Joseph, President, Sheepmeat Council of Australia