

Submission in relation to the adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, in particular with respect to foot-and-mouth disease (FMD).

Submitted by

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ASSBA

The Australian Stud Sheep Breeders Association is a large, stable and long-established body that currently provides registration services for 25 British, Australian and Imported breeds of sheep, representing approximately 650 registered studs. The ASSBA registers more sheep breeds than any other body in Australia and can justifiably claim to be the only stud sheep registration body to take an industry-wide view.

Summary

This submission states the need for the establishment of a National Livestock Gene Bank due to the high degree of vulnerability that many breeds of sheep face in the event of a FMD outbreak.

Context

As ASSBA is an association that only deals with sheep, this submission is only addressing those matters that relate to sheep, in particular stud sheep and the breeds registered with ASSBA.

ASSBA appreciates that there are many plans in place that relate to how an outbreak of FMD would be handled if such an event were to occur. Animal Health Australia (AHA) has produced a guidance document under the AUSVETPLAN which relates to Rare and Valuable Animals (RVA). While this document is welcomed it does not guarantee that rare and valuable sheep would not be slaughtered in the event of a FMD outbreak. These plans are necessary but are only reactive, not proactive.

Some 17 breeds of sheep that are registered with ASSBA could be described as being very vulnerable to being exterminated in Australia if there was a major outbreak of FMD.

The Rare Breeds Trust of Australia (RBT), on their 2020 watchlist, list as:

CRITICAL (less than 300 breeding females) 15 breeds of sheep
ENDANGERED (less than 500 breeding females) 4 breeds of sheep
VULNERABLE (less than 900 breeding females) 5 breeds of sheep

These figures do not fully indicate the vulnerability of some of these breeds of sheep as the entire breed may be in the hands of only a few, and in some cases, one or two breeders. If an outbreak of FMD resulted in these flock being slaughtered, then entire breeds could be lost.

While Australia's strict BICON regulations governing the importation of sheep genetic material (semen and embryos) theoretically allows importations, in practice these regulations are virtually impossible to meet. This in practice means that sheep genetic material cannot be imported.

A proactive approach to help protect Australia's sheep breeds (and all other livestock) in the event of a FMD outbreak would be the establishment of a National Livestock Gene Bank, a type of high-tech Noah's Ark, in which semen, embryos and other genetic material would be stored. This bank of genetic material would allow the reintroduction or quick build-up of breeds if required.

In the wake of the 2001 FMD outbreak in the UK, during which some 6 million sheep and cattle were slaughtered, the UK bolstered its national livestock gene bank. Australia does not have a national livestock gene bank.