

**SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT REFERENCES
COMMITTEE REPORT**

'The Incidence of Ovine Johne's Disease in the Australian Sheep Flock – Second Report'

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

February 2003

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND
TRANSPORT REFERENCES COMMITTEE REPORT:
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Preamble

The Government has considered the *'The Incidence of Ovine Johne's Disease in the Australian Sheep Flock – Second Report'* of the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee and is pleased to provide the following response. The Government would like to acknowledge the efforts of the Committee in preparing its second report that seeks to address a range of issues relating to Ovine Johne's disease (OJD).

Most of the recommendations in the second report are consistent with the recommendations of the Mid-Term Review of the National Ovine Johne's Disease Control and Evaluation Program (NOJDP) conducted by Animal Health Australia (AHA) in 2001. Implementation of the recommendations of the Mid-Term Review has been undertaken by AHA in consultation with industry and government stakeholders, including the Commonwealth, and is now substantially completed.

AHA is now responsible for managing nationally agreed animal health programs such as the NOJDP. Responsibility for delivery of the operational aspects of the NOJDP, including control and surveillance activities, rests with the relevant State agency, in consultation with industry. Commonwealth involvement in endemic disease control programs, such as the NOJDP, is now limited to its specific funding obligations under the program, the collection of levies on a national basis in accordance with national industry requests and the provision of policy, scientific and technical advice.

The Committee's recommendations are addressed in turn below.

COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

General Recommendations

Recommendation 1

1. *The Committee recommends that the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry pursue in ARMCANZ matters requiring action arising from the Mid-Term Review Committee's recommendations.*

Accepted. In August 2001, ARMCANZ Ministers considered a progress report prepared by AHA on implementation of the NOJDP Mid-Term Review recommendations. Ministers noted there has been substantial progress in implementing the recommendations from the Mid-Term Review and that AHA was preparing a revised NOJDP Business Plan for the period 2001 to 2004. The revised Business Plan incorporated key changes as reflected in the Mid-Term Review and the Senate Inquiry.

In light of a further reappraisal of the NOJDP in early 2002 AHA prepared a Two Year Transitional Program Plan 2002-2004 to further revise the NOJDP Business Plan. The Primary Industries Ministerial Council (PIMC), that replaced ARMCANZ, considered further progress reports on the NOJDP from AHA at its meetings in May 2002 and October 2002. The Transitional Plan is currently with stakeholders for endorsement.

Specific Recommendations

Recommendation 2

2. *The Committee recommends that:*
 - *in the short to medium term, the management priority for infected properties in high prevalence areas should be on disease management rather than eradication; and*
 - *the long term goal be the eradication of OJD from Australia, until and unless the disease is determined to have become endemic in significant parts of Australia.*

Supported in part. Outcomes to date from the research and development component of the NOJDP indicate that eradication of OJD is not feasible in the short to medium term given current technology, and that as OJD is endemic in parts of south-eastern Australia, the focus will need to shift to on-farm control and management of the disease, including the use of vaccine, supported by a coordinated cross-border approach to disease control.

Efforts to reduce the instance of disease in low prevalence areas are being pursued in the short term to lessen the risk of spread of the disease. In the high prevalence areas, the emphasis is on the gradual reduction in prevalence via modified sheep husbandry practices and the use of vaccine over a longer time frame.

Recommendation 3

3. *The Committee recommends that, subject to appropriate vendor declarations, trading between the Control Zone and the Residual Zone be permitted and that this proposal be placed before ARMCANZ as a matter of urgency.*

Supported in principle. The Government supports a risk-based approach to trading provided it is commensurate with sound disease control principles, including establishment of the risk posed by the sheep to be traded. Trading of sheep is currently permitted between zones subject to appropriate disease control requirements.

In August 2001, the National Veterinary Committee endorsed a substantial revision of the Standard Definitions and Rules for OJD incorporating enhanced control measures arising from an April 2001 National Control Strategies Workshop, including wider use of vaccine in NSW, and a model OJD vendor declaration.

In September 2002, PIMC endorsed the 4th edition of the OJD Standard Definitions and Rules containing significant additions providing guidelines for the development of individual property management programs, including the use of vaccine, epidemiological investigations of infected flocks, pathways for infected flocks and surveillance requirements for maintenance and progression of zones.

Recommendation 4

4. *With a view to making vaccine available to producers at the earliest possible time, the Committee strongly supports all necessary steps being taken to facilitate discussions with the National Registration Authority for Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals for revision of the current NSW permit to extend the use of Gudair OJD vaccine, while recognising the importance of expediting the completion of the necessary trials for registration.*

Agreed. On 4 July 2001 the National Registration Authority for Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals (NRA) issued a new permit for the use of 'Gudair' vaccine in Rural Lands Protection Boards approved by the NSW Department of Agriculture. This enabled the vaccine to be used in sheep on properties that are quarantined on account of the presence or suspected presence of OJD.

On 16 April 2002 the NRA granted registration of the "Gudair" vaccine for use nationally. The availability and use of vaccine is now a matter for each state to determine.

Recommendation 5

5. *The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government initiate the establishment of a national sheep disease fund to which all sheep producers should contribute and which can be used by producers in every State. The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Australia should place the establishment of this proposed fund before ARMCANZ for assessment and decision by the end of 2001. If ARMCANZ and industry decide not to proceed with the fund, the Committee believes that commercial reality should prevail and that producers should be permitted to decide whether to vaccinate their flocks on the usual commercial basis governing such stock management options.*

Supported in principle. The government supports the provision of financial assistance to affected producers. The government also supports the view of the Mid-Term Review that the national sheep

industry, as the prime beneficiary of disease control, should raise funds via a national levy to assist affected producers.

However, the initiative for establishment of a national sheep disease fund rests with the national sheep industry. Under the Government's levy principles and guidelines industry is required to demonstrate national industry support for any levy proposal.

The government has worked closely with the Sheepmeat Council of Australia and WoolProducers to examine mechanisms, including a national levy, to provide funding for financial assistance to affected producers. The national sheep industry has been unable to obtain support from all member organizations for a national levy to fund assistance programs for affected producers.

Under the proposed Two Year Transitional Program Plan 2002-2004 for the NOJDP some Commonwealth (and national sheep industry) funding will be redirected to assist producers to maintain traditional trading patterns in light of recent changes implemented to OJD zones.

Recommendation 6

6. *The Committee recommends that the appointment of a full-time manager for the NOJDP to manage national program delivery, budgets, accountability of outcomes and to ensure a co-ordinated national focus on the Program be a matter of priority. The Committee recommends that the Government pursue this recommendation so it is fulfilled by the end of 2001.*

Supported. AHA appointed a full time NOJDP Manager in August 2001.

Recommendation 7

7. *The Committee recommends that Animal Health Australia requests SCARM to facilitate the development of a national information system for the collection and analysis of disease data. The Committee recommends that the Government pursues this recommendation so that it is in place by the end of 2001.*

Supported. In September 2002 Primary Industries Standing Committee (PISC), that replaced SCARM, agreed to the establishment of a small high level Steering Group to identify the information needed for national decision-making regarding animal health issues. As part of this process, Australia's information management needs for both endemic diseases, such as OJD, and for emergency animal disease information management are being examined. Further, AHA is considering enhancement of the existing National Animal Health Information System (NAHIS).

Recommendation 8

8. *The Committee recommends that a mandatory vendor declaration scheme be established for all sheep transactions as a matter of priority and that the Government pursue this recommendation so it is fulfilled by the end of 2001.*

Supported in part. The Government supports the use of vendor declarations in the implementation of a risk-based approach to the management of OJD. The mandating of the use of vendor declarations is a matter for industry and state/territory governments to consider.

The national sheep industry has developed a national vendor declaration form for use by sheep producers when trading sheep. Its use is currently voluntary and it does not contain OJD information.

Recommendation 9

9. *The Committee recommends that appropriate numbers of staff are employed by the relevant governments to ensure timely trace-forward/trace-back activities and to service the additional activities required for adoption of Mid-Term Review Recommendations. The Committee recommends that this should be in place by the end of 2001, or if not practical, by 1 July 2002 at the latest.*

Supported. States are responsible for ensuring the adequacy of staffing to deliver trace-forward/trace-back activities under the program. In August 2001, ARMCANZ agreed to provide sufficient resources to the NOJDP in line with Recommendation 33 of the Mid-Term Review, to meet agreed commitments under the existing Deed of Agreement. Recommendation 33 addresses government responsibility for funding appropriate staff levels for NOJDP activities.

Recommendation 10

10. The Committee recommends that the co-ordination and management of OJD Research and Development be strengthened through:

- *appointment of a national Research and Development Co-ordinator by Animal Health Australia to be responsible directly to Animal Health Australia, and*
- *a new management agreement with Meat and Livestock Australia for their administration and budget control of approved Research and Development trials.*

The Committee recommends that this should be in place by the end of 2001, or if not practical by 1 July 2002.

Supported in principle. AHA is responsible for the overall management of the Research and Development (R&D) element of the NOJDP. The required strengthening of R&D coordination and reporting has been dealt with in a revised contractual arrangement between AHA and Meat and Livestock Australia, including the establishment of a technical advisory committee for research and development. As a result, AHA considered the appointment of a national R&D Coordinator was not necessary.

Recommendation 11

11. The Committee recommends intensifying research on current available OJD diagnostic tests.

Supported in principle. The NOJDP R&D program is regularly reviewed in response to new needs and research results. Diagnostic tests continue to receive a high priority in the R&D program.

Recommendation 12

12. The Committee recommends that case studies of successful on-farm management of the disease and knowledge of international trends in the management of OJD should also form an essential part of the communication and education program, particularly as these issues have yet to become an acceptable part of a "whole of industry" attack on the long-term effect of OJD.

Agreed. AHA works closely with States in the production of a range of 'information' products addressing the on-farm management of OJD. The communications sub program was reviewed as part of the revision of the NOJDP Business Plan.

Recommendation 13

13. The Committee recommends that the current Abattoir Surveillance Program for OJD should be maintained in all states.

Agreed. For the remainder of the NOJDP, on-going surveillance by States for OJD will increasingly be based on abattoir surveillance.

Recommendation 14

14. The Committee recommends that the Government's response to the Committee's Report be tabled as soon as possible, but no later than the last sitting day for 2001, indicating proposed implementation dates for matters recommended by the Mid-Term Review and this Committee.

Noted. Implementation of the Mid-Term review and the Senate Inquiry has been progressed by AHA in consultation with industry and government stakeholders, including the Commonwealth.