

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

9.1 In the course of preparing its report, the Committee has incorporated information gained from a wide range of background materials, studies and published papers on possible responses to the emergence of Ovine Johne's Disease in the Australian sheep flock.

9.2 In addition, the Committee Inquiry has generated a large amount of information through submissions and *Hansard* records of extensive public hearings. In this regard, the Committee's Inquiry, the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry and the Mid-Term Review have sought and obtained information and submissions from the producers, officials, scientists and organisations most affected, and who can most effectively contribute to future responses to OJD.

9.3 It is important that the Committee observe that, with the exception of contacts made by the Mid-Term Review in Western Australia and Queensland, the Committee's Inquiry has taken detailed submissions from substantially the same individuals and organisations.

9.4 As noted in Chapter Eight, the Committee supports the recommendations made by the Mid-Term Review, and where appropriate has recommended that the Government consider these recommendations and advise the Parliament as soon as possible of the timetable for their implementation.

9.5 The Committee considers that its own general observations on matters raised during its own Inquiry, which follow, should be read in conjunction with the Committee's observations and comments on the Mid-Term Review recommendations.

Committee Observations

9.6 A paper presented to the 4th International Congress for Sheep Veterinarians in Armidale in 1997 acknowledged that:

Fifteen years after the first diagnosis of the disease in Australia, ovine Johne's disease has become a significant issue for the Australian sheep industry.¹

1 Denholm, L., Ottaway, S., Cornish, J., and Merton, P., *Johne's Disease Sheep Industry Steering Committee and NSW Agriculture, Invited paper to be presented in the plenary session of the 4th International Congress for Sheep Veterinarians, Armidale, NSW, 6 February 1997, p. 1.*

9.7 During the Committee's Inquiry, it was clear that the majority of witnesses would agree with the above statement. It is also clear to the Committee however, that whilst OJD is of concern to the sheep industry, the program set up to control the disease has also become a significant issue and is creating considerable hardship for producers.

9.8 The Committee notes that there are considerable differences in the approaches taken in the management of OJD across and within state boundaries. There is, however, a considerable degree of consensus amongst governments, industry bodies and individual producers about the need to continue to control the spread of the disease.

9.9 The Committee, in preparing this report, had the opportunity to consider the very successful national Bovine Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign (BTEC) which was planned, organised and implemented as a national disease eradication program, under overall Commonwealth co-ordination. The Committee considers that the BTEC program is an example of how a national animal disease program can be effected.

Communication Program

9.10 The Committee is particularly concerned about the number of individual producers and industry groups who expressed a general lack of confidence in the administrative processes of the National OJD Program.

9.11 Producers were particularly critical of what they described as an overly complicated and inflexible regulatory regime. The Committee acknowledges that the results of an inflexible Program include: restrictions on trade, the lack of a clearly defined pathway through disease control restrictions and considerable financial and emotional hardship for producers.

9.12 The Committee notes the need to improve communication between those responsible for the administration of the program, peak sheep industry bodies and individual producers. It is important that producers have more input into the National Program and that the issues they identify as problematic are taken into account to enable the Program to be tailored accordingly.

Research

9.13 The Committee notes that there is considerable agreement amongst stakeholders about the importance of completing research projects and gathering more information about whether it is possible to eradicate OJD from the Australian sheep flock, or at least in those areas of low prevalence.

9.14 The Committee is concerned about the delays in allocating research funding and notes that the delays have had an impact - both on expected outcomes and on the credibility of the program. The Committee believes that in order to improve confidence in the research component of the Program, it is important that producers be

provided with detailed information about research schedules and research results at regular intervals.

Financial Assistance for Affected Producers

9.15 It is clear to the Committee that the lack of financial assistance is one of the most significant problems for affected producers. The Committee is strongly of the opinion that the future success of the National OJD Program depends on all stakeholders working co-operatively to negotiate a financial assistance package that is going to provide useful assistance for those producers affected by OJD. The Committee also believes that the provision of financial assistance is essential to restore confidence in the Program and to encourage voluntary testing and reporting of the disease.

9.16 The Committee believes that OJD is a disease that has the potential to affect increasingly large numbers of producers, as evidenced by recent reports of the disease being identified in the south east region of South Australia. The Committee believes that sheep producers in all states should take responsibility for funding its evaluation and control.

9.17 Unless a fair and proper compensation arrangement exists for affected producers, the reality of a trading market in live sheep (excluding sale for slaughter) is that producers will not report suspected incidence in their flocks. Accordingly the entire program for controlling and eradicating OJD will fail.

9.18 Under the current trading regime, it remains likely that the considerable commercial damage to affected producers will mean that producers will continue to resist testing and fail to report OJD. The inevitable result will be that every flock of clean sheep in the country is placed at potential risk. The only way to alleviate this situation is for the Commonwealth and States, in conjunction with industry, to contribute towards fair and adequate compensation based on the prevailing commercial value of sheep affected.

9.19 The Committee strongly considers that, if it is not deemed to be appropriate or possible to pay compensation in this manner, then commercial reality should be allowed to prevail and individual producers should be permitted to decide whether to vaccinate their flocks on the usual commercial basis governing such stock management options.

9.20 The Committee considers that an effective sheep disease fund should include a range of assistance measures, including:

- compensation for de-stocking of properties;
- special assistance for stud breeders;
- assistance with fence repairs and fencing of water courses; and

- subsidising the purchase of vaccine.

National Co-ordinator

9.21 The Committee also believes very strongly that there is a need for the Commonwealth and industry to show leadership on the issue of OJD and move toward a truly national, co-ordinated, co-operative approach to the control of OJD.

9.22 The Committee is particularly mindful that one of the key issues of this Inquiry relates to the feasibility of having a national program when a number of key elements are not working and there appears to be no clear leadership. There is consensus amongst the key players that there is a need for a national approach and a need for leadership. It appears to the Committee however, that rather than take the initiative, a number of the parties are waiting passively for a 'leader' to emerge.

9.23 As stated above, the Committee sees an obvious need to work toward setting and achieving national goals for the Program. The Committee backs the recommendation made by the Mid-Term Review Committee for a National Manager and a Research Development Co-ordinator for the Program.

Eradication

9.24 The Committee notes that there is still insufficient information about the prevalence of the disease and would argue that the two questions raised during the Committee's 1998 Inquiry are still very relevant:

- is eradication possible from a biological point of view, taking into consideration the geographical distribution of the disease; and
- is eradication likely to be of economic benefit, either now, or into the future?²

9.25 It is clear to the Committee that the initial focus of the National Program was on eradication and certain elements of this focus continue to flavour the control strategies and policy decisions being taken by state authorities and peak industry bodies. The Committee is agreed that whilst eradication could certainly remain a long-term goal, the emphasis needs to be on control and evaluation.

2 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *The Incidence of Ovine Johne's Disease in the Australian Sheep Flock, First Report*, July 1998, p. 15. The Committee supports and endorses these recommendations.

Committee's Recommendations

General Recommendations

Recommendation 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.

Specific Recommendations

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 11

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

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 13

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

Recommendation 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.

Senator John Woodley
Chairman
July 2001

