Submission from the Australian Veterinary Association

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The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 8000 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with farm animals, companion animals, horses, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

The Australian Sheep Veterinarians (ASV) is a special interest group of the AVA and the group’s members have provided the information and feedback on the identified options for improving the NLIS.

Recommendations

1. Any measures helping to control and respond to disease through the use of accurate traceability systems are supported by the Australian Veterinary Association.

2. Individual Electronic Identification Devices (EID) for sheep are recommended as an animal health priority and for disease traceability, but it is recognised there are substantial barriers to this with current producer opposition in most states.

3. Appropriate funding for research into the use of individual EID for quantification and detection of endemic diseases is needed so the system provides a return to producers at all times rather than only when a market is threatened by a disease outbreak.

4. Specific research is needed into implants or durable plastics for external tags as a means of improving retention rates for EIDs and minimising the cost to the producer.

5. The adoption of any EID system must be accepted nationally.

Discussion

There is strong support for individual identification systems as the AVA recognises that these systems will not prevent disease but will enable effective control, response and tracing programs to be established.

National tracing of sheep and goats is currently very difficult as there is very little or no lifetime tracing of an individual animal. With an EID system data collection would be more efficient and would be of some benefit to producers, but a major benefit for Department of Agriculture staff when dealing with mixed mobs such as seen at abattoirs or saleyards.
The current system of property identification codes (PIC) and owners on plastic ear tags is effective to trace the property of an animal’s birth but any tracing of intermediate properties is problematic.

The strong view of both the NSW sheep industry and the NSW government (DPI) is that mob-based identification is cost-effective. Auditing of saleyards across NSW occurred over the last year and achieved an approximate 98% compliance rate. We are aware that industry perceptions are to avoid compulsory EID for individual identification because of the cost, including the cost of an EID reader. Unless the producer is performance recording, there will be no direct benefit to them from the cost of an EID over a 22c plastic ear tag with a PIC.

However in Victoria, mob-based sheep identification has failed the last two European Union (EU) audits. For example, over 50% of National Vendor Declarations (NVDs) audited at saleyards in Victoria consistently have errors, such as incomplete records of all of the PICs in mixed lots; and about 2/3 of the 11 million sheep killed in Victoria are sent to abattoirs as mixed lots (out of saleyards), further compounding transcription errors. It is only through an electronic database that tracing can be easily performed, when the situation arises.

These conflicting examples of the current level of compliance are concerning and the true national picture should be investigated to understand the national trend of sheep and goat ‘whole of life’ identification.

Victoria has made a strong budget commitment to the introduction of individual sheep EIDs on the grounds of traceability for disease purposes, as Victoria produces 29% of Australia’s agricultural exports. The lack of EIDs in sheep not only threatens our markets in the EU, but our lucrative markets in Japan and Korea, which take the EU standards as a minimum.

The AVA supports a nationally-recognised EID system of identification in sheep and goats as the traceability for ‘whole of life’ is important to satisfying our export partner demands and can be used to increase producer productivity.