



# Raise the baa to stop OJD spread

Victorian sheep producers should get with the ovine Johne's Disease program to secure trade writes  
**KATE JOSEPH**



OVINE Johne's Disease 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.

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, NSW 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 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, 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 buy sheep unless they come with a Sheep Health Statement confirming their

health status. The SHS provides useful information on OJD, as well as footrot, lice and ovine brucellosis.

- Always aim to buy sheep with a higher ABC score than your own flock's to help reduce the chances of introducing OJD to your farm, particularly if you're living in a medium or high-prevalence area.

- Vaccinate sheep with Gudair if you plan to keep sheep for more than 12 months (including wethers), or when you sell them as replacements. Vaccination is most effective when administered 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.

- Arrange to have your sheep monitored at the abattoir to identify early signs of disease. 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.

Recently in Japan a law was introduced to stop home-grown OJD-infected animal products entering their internal food chain. 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 No.1 trading partner for red meat, with more than \$2.3 billion worth of Australian beef and sheepmeat exported to Japan and Korea last year, 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. 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, or monitoring for footrot when buying 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

SHS and the ABC scheme, to reduce the risk of infection in the first place.

● **Kate Joseph is president of the Sheepmeat Council of Australia**



**Limit the risks:** producers should never buy sheep without Sheep Health Statements