

Do you know the signs of FMD in sheep?

By Emma Rooke, LBN Regional Officer, SA.

An outbreak of foot and mouth disease (FMD) would devastate Australia's export focussed livestock industry by shutting down our high value markets overnight. In a large outbreak, beef prices would drop by a massive 80% and may not fully recover after 10 years. Even a small outbreak would cause a price drop of around 15% and take 3-4 years to recover.

FMD is highly infectious and early detection and reporting of disease is essential to enable rapid response and to reduce long term impacts of FMD on the livestock industry.

But would you be able to detect FMD in your sheep?

Unlike the spectacular signs seen in cattle and pigs, FMD in sheep is often a very mild disease that may go unnoticed. One of the reasons FMD spread so quickly in the UK in 2001 was that healthy looking sheep with FMD went to a saleyard, mixed with other sheep, then the disease dispersed silently all over the country.

FMD may cause blisters on the soft parts of the feet, mouth, udder and genitalia of affected animals. These blisters then turn into painful ulcers that can cause lameness, depression, reluctance to eat and reluctance to suckle young. Affected sheep may look sick and be reluctant to stand. In commercial dairy sheep, milk yields would drop suddenly. In some cases, abortions, stillbirths and lamb mortality can be seen.

However, during the 2001 epidemic in the UK, signs in sheep were sometimes so mild that the presence of the disease was revealed only by very close examination of all the sheep in a flock.

Lameness is the main sign of FMD in sheep. When it occurs, lameness will develop suddenly, spread quickly, involve a large proportion of your flock, then resolve within a number of days. Compare this to footrot which has a slower onset, lasts longer and does not involve as many sheep as quickly.

While their feet are sore, you may just notice a tendency for your sheep to lie down more than usual or an unwillingness to move when made to stand. On examination, blisters are almost never seen but small ulcers might be seen around the coronary band under the hair at the top of the hoof wall.

Suspicion of FMD might be increased if other in-contact management groups or neighbours' animals are experiencing similar signs; and significantly heightened if illness is also detected in cattle or pigs which are excellent indicators of disease. You should expect spectacular signs from these animals including drooling, not eating, a sudden drop in milk production and severe lameness or inability to stand.

Because FMD might not be immediately apparent in your flock, on-farm biosecurity is a key tool to prevent the entry or spread of this disease on your farm. Good on-farm biosecurity reduces the spread of disease by reducing the likelihood of disease entering your farm, and increasing the likelihood of it

being detected if it arrives. Biosecurity should be practiced at all times, not just during an outbreak, as it will protect your enterprise from common production-limiting diseases that threaten your livestock everyday including footrot, lice, Johne's disease and internal parasites. Remember the best time to implement a biosecurity plan is before an outbreak of disease not after you have it.

Like these common diseases, FMD can be spread through movement of livestock, people, vehicles and equipment, and pets who have been in contact with infected animals. Appropriate carcass disposal is important to prevent scavengers from spreading disease. Feeding meat or meat products to livestock (swill feeding) also increases the risk of transmission of FMD. Regular observation of your flock and keeping records of on-farm activities and illness in your stock will help you detect more subtle outbreaks of disease and act on them early.

If you do notice something 'unusual' in your flock, don't hesitate to give your local vet or animal health officer a call to discuss. They will be able to advise you on the best course of action and subsidies are available for disease investigation in some cases. If you don't know who to call, the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline is available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day - 1800 675 888.

To find out more about how you can protect your farm from common livestock diseases and be more prepared for an FMD outbreak go to www.farmbiosecurity.com.au or contact your local Livestock Biosecurity Network officer – www.lbn.org.au.

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