

**GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO
ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE REPORT
"CONTROL OF OVINE JOHNE'S DISEASE IN VICTORIA"**

Recommendation 1

That the broad aim for the management of OJD in Victoria be to minimise the adverse impacts of OJD on the wellbeing of the Victorian sheep industries, rural communities and individuals.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted.

Recommendation 2

That specific objectives of revitalised Victorian OJD Control Program be:

In the short term (next three years):

- a) to prevent the further spread of OJD in Victoria;
- b) to ensure control programs are based on 'good science' (i.e. are technically feasible);
- c) to support farmers with or suspected of having OJD-infected flocks to return to normal trading or change to a different enterprise;
- d) for those with diseased flocks, to reduce symptoms in sheep;
- e) to prevent the reinfection of destocked properties;
- f) to ensure that control programs are cost effective (ideally for the individual farm as well as for the industry);
- g) to ensure that the beneficiaries of control actions contribute to the cost of those actions;
- h) to minimise adverse social impacts of OJD and OJD control programs.

In the long term (three years plus), as above plus:

- i) to eradicate OJD from the Victorian flock - if feasible;
- j) to prevent reinfection of the Victorian flock from OJD.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted; Advisory Committee requested to develop revitalised program with these objectives

Recommendation 3

That a broad-based Committee, to be called the Victorian OJD Advisory Committee, be established to give ongoing advice to the Minister on the management of OJD in Victoria.

Its duties are to include:

- a) provision of advice as to how best to implement the recommendations of this Inquiry;
- b) consideration and provision of advice on how best to respond to the findings of research as it comes available;
- c) provision of comment on how interstate OJD management is impacting on the Victorian sheep industry;
- d) oversight of consultation on proposed changes to the *Standard Definitions and Rules* and the *Manual of Procedures* as they may affect the management of OJD in Victoria;
- e) acting as an appeals body for disputes about property disease control plans;
- f) providing advice on the provision of information on OJD and its management;
- and
- g) any other matters relevant to OJD and the financial and social implications of its control.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted.

- *The Advisory Committee has been established with the following Terms of Reference:*
 1. *To advise the Victorian Minister for Agriculture on the design, costs and implementation of an OJD program for Victoria, with reference to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee report on the control of Ovine Johne's Disease in Victoria.*
 2. *To provide advice as requested on Ovine Johne's Disease in Victoria, with final recommendations presented to the Minister no later than 30 June 2001.*
 3. *In providing advice and designing a recommended program the Committee shall ensure that it meets the following objectives:-*
 - a) *to maintain consistency with the National Ovine Johne's Disease Program and standards and practices of the National Standard Definitions and Rules for OJD;*
 - b) *to prevent the further spread of OJD in Victoria;*
 - c) *to assist farmers with or suspected of having OJD-infected flocks to return to normal trading or change to a different enterprise;*
 - d) *to ensure that control programs are cost effective (ideally for the individual farm as well as for the industry);*
 - e) *to ensure that the beneficiaries of control actions contribute to the cost of those actions;*
 - f) *to minimise adverse social impacts of OJD and OJD control programs;*
 - g) *to ensure that Victorian sheep producers continue to have maximum access to interstate markets; and*
 - h) *to keep open an objective of eradication of OJD from Victoria in the long term should this be feasible and consistent with the National approach.*
- *The Committee has met 3 times and has endorsed a program of extended abattoir monitoring across Victoria, and an NRE Communication Strategy aimed at providing improved factual information on OJD to all sectors of the Industry.*

Recommendation 4

That the membership of the recommended Victorian OJD Advisory Committee include:

- a) an independent chairman (to be appointed by the Minister);
- b) a person representing the broader sheep industry (to be nominated by the Victorian Farmers Federation - Pastoral Group);
- c) a person representing merino sheep breeders (to be nominated by the Victorian Sheep Breeders Association);
- d) a person representing meat breeds (to be appointed from a panel submitted to the Minister by the major breed associations);
- e) a person representing those producers directly affected (to be nominated by the OJD Action Group);
- f) a person representing private sheep veterinary surgeons (to be nominated by the Sheep Veterinary Society of Victoria - a special interest group of the Australian Veterinary Association);
- g) a person representing stock agents (to be nominated by the Victorian Stock Agents Association);
- h) a person representing rural workers (to be nominated by the Australian Workers Union);
- i) a research scientist who is not currently employed by the public service with experience in OJD research (to be appointed from a panel of names submitted to the Minister); and
- j) a social scientist with experience in rural counselling (to be appointed from a panel of names submitted to the Minister).

Representatives of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment's animal health policy and program delivery sections should assist and support the Advisory Committee but not have voting rights. The Advisory Committee may co-opt additional non-voting members to provide extra areas of expertise as required. A nominee of the National OJD Program be invited to participate as the observer.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. Advisory Committee established. The membership is:

- Hon John Fogarty, AM (Independent Chairman)
- Mr Ian Feldtmann - representing the broader sheep industry
- Mr Michael Collins - representing merino sheep breeders
- Mr Graeme Harvey - representing meat breeds
- Mr Frank Tobin - representing OJD-affected producers
- Dr David Hucker - representing private sheep veterinary practitioners
- Mr John Smith - representing stock agents
- Mr Sam Beechey - representing rural workers
- Dr John Larsen - research scientist with experience in OJD research
- Mr Roger Burton - social scientist with experience in rural counselling
- Dr Hugh Millar - technical advisor (non-member)
- Dr John Galvin - technical advisor (non-member)

Recommendation 5

That adequate resources be provided to enable the recommended Victorian OJD Advisory Committee to undertake its business and to consult effectively with its constituencies.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted.

Recommendation 6

That a process and system of ongoing consultation to a cross-section of affected and other interested parties be established to provide input into regular review of the detailed program and its delivery.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. The Committee currently plays this role and will be consulted on its view of an ongoing consultative structure.

Recommendation 7

Any and all changes to the program and delivery need to be well communicated to all those affected, including those delivering the program. Government officers, private veterinarians, stock agents, saleyard managers, show organisers and shearers and other rural workers must be included in this consultation.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. The OJD advisory committee has proposed a communication strategy on OJD which will be implemented.

The key elements of the strategy include:

- * Information Kit*
- * Community Information Sessions*
- * Advertising*
- * Information Inserts in Rural Press*
- * Media strategy to be developed*
- * Internet*
- * VicFarm Online*
- * NRE networks*
- * Customer Service Centre*
- * NRE staff weekly newsletter*
- * Speaking notes*
- * Staff/Stakeholder briefings*
- * National handbook on OJD.*

Recommendation 8

That a formal control program be in place and be designed to ensure that the minimum requirements of the National OJD Program's *Standard Definitions and Rules* for 'control' zone are met and maintained. Flocks and properties known to be infected or that are 'suspect' or 'under surveillance' will need to be managed in a manner that prevents the spread of OJD.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. Reflected in Terms of Reference of Advisory Committee. Victoria is currently meeting the minimum requirements of the National OJD Program.

This involves surveillance activities to determine the prevalence and distribution of OJD, and tracing and movement controls to contain the spread of the disease.

Recommendation 9

That the Victorian OJD Control Program provide for increased choice by affected producers and offer a combination of control strategies. Such control strategies shall include containment with individual farm management minimisation; containment with gradual contamination reduction or district-based flexible property management; and voluntary destocking. Containment is to be obtained through a combination of testing, quarantine and hygiene. The specific strategies adopted are to be chosen by the affected producer or group of producers in consultation with government or accredited veterinarians, acknowledging that not all strategies may be practical or feasible in all circumstances.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 10

That an option of farm-based eradication by destocking be retained and encouraged by way of reinstating a compensation scheme.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 11

That any and all such control strategies only be provided in conjunction with a delivery program that has been designed in conjunction with farmers, neighbouring farmers, social scientists, the rural finance industry and communication experts and all those being given the responsibility of delivering the program.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001. The Government believes any future OJD program will only be successful if supported by the groups mentioned. This approach is reflected in the establishment and Terms of Reference of the OJD Advisory Committee.

Recommendation 12

That the time frame for affected producers to decide which option best meets their own circumstances be flexible, with the producer retaining the ability to adopt a destocking option with allied compensation at any time.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 13

That adequate resources in type and quantity be provided from Departmental resources for all aspects of delivery.

Victorian Government Response: The Department currently allocates \$9.8 million to the provision of veterinary services. Any specific recommendations by the Advisory Committee in relation to resourcing levels will be considered through the normal budget processes having regard to overall government priorities for agriculture.

Recommendation 14

That each Department of Natural Resources and Environment region be provided with resources to support and encourage the formation of catchment-based OJD advisory/support/information groups. Such groups should be charged with the responsibility of developing district and/or regional strategies and approaches. All such strategies would need to be subject to consistent Statewide guidelines, but encourage flexibility at a regional and local level to respond to regional and local circumstances. Such catchment-based groups could also provide guidelines for the preparation of property disease control plans that reflect individual property circumstances in the context of the particular region.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 15

That groups of local farmers, perhaps in conjunction with local Bestwool 2010 groups or other similar groups, be encouraged to work together to take on responsibility for their own disease prevention and control.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 16

District veterinary officers or accredited veterinarians should assist producers to prepare property and district disease control plans and be responsible for the approval of Property Disease Control Plans. Approval to be subject to meeting any current Statewide or regional guidelines. Such approved Property Disease Control Plans are to be given a legal basis in statute.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. Property disease control plans are prepared by district veterinary staff in conjunction with the flock owner and their advisors. These plans are developed into an Agreement, which is legally underpinned by the Livestock Disease Control Act 1994 (Section 17).

Recommendation 17

That an independent appeals mechanism for Property Disease Control Plans be provided.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 18

That an increase in resources be made available to provide information to assist all sheep and goat producers in the State to obtain a clear understanding of OJD and available management tools to prevent and deal with infection. In particular, new authoritative material is required to assist producers to take advantage of alternative control strategies, such as containment with individual farm management minimisation or containment with gradual contamination reduction or district-based flexible property management as well as voluntary destocking.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. The nature of ongoing communications will be determined by the final recommendations of the OJD Committee. Any specific recommendations by the Advisory Committee in relation to resourcing levels will be considered through the normal budget processes, having regard to overall government programs for agriculture.

Recommendation 19

That materials providing information on support services be substantially overhauled and upgraded and better tailored to the target user. Communication experts and user groups need to be involved in the preparation of such material. Use of easy-to-read pamphlets and newsletters, provision of regular information to the rural press and radio, creation of Web-page material and the publishing of authoritative technical papers are all required.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. This process has already commenced. The first pamphlet will be mailed to all farmers.

Recommendation 20

That mechanisms to minimise the exposure to financial risk of stud and/or flock owners who undertake testing for market assurance purposes be explored in collaboration with producers.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 21

That the Department of Natural Resources and Environment seek discussions with industry and producers on the costs and benefits of a compulsory vendor declaration that specifies the OJD status of a flock with respect to known risk factors of infection, including but not restricted to any flock testing.

Victorian Government Response: Vendor declarations are industry initiatives. NRE is available to assist industry with consideration of the costs and benefits. The role of such declarations in OJD programs is referred to the Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001 and if required, discussion will then be held.

Recommendation 22

That as a priority, each sheep in Victoria to have property identification. In addition, that the State of Victoria actively promote the adoption of a national program of property identification and encourage industry and appropriate national organisations to investigate the feasibility of individual identification of sheep.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. The implementation of a property identification and traceback program for sheep is an issue for industry. The Government has, and will continue, to provide for the adoption by the Sheep industry of identification schemes. Market demands, and food safety issues, will increasingly drive the sheep industry to embrace this important issue. A detailed discussion paper is being prepared by NRE for presentation to the National OJD Program Advisory Committee, and Animal Health Australia.

Recommendation 23

In the absence of a national program, the Government should unilaterally introduce a requirement that all sheep flocks entering Victoria be subject to certification showing the origin and zone status of the sheep.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted in principle. In the absence of a national program, results of testing by producers in addition to certification would be required for sheep from high risk areas.

Recommendation 24

That the procedures for obtaining statistical samples be clearly defined and distributed in an easy-to-understand form. Any such guidelines need to be consistently applied.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. Procedures for statistically based sampling have been agreed nationally, and underpin the Market Assurance Programs. Procedures will be included in the information material being prepared under the NRE communications strategy.

Recommendation 25

That pooled faecal testing be introduced into Victoria as an alternative routine test for diagnosing infected flocks as soon as possible.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted and implemented. The Pooled Faecal Culture (PFC) test has now been endorsed by Veterinary Committee as a nationally approved test for OJD. Several Victorian veterinary laboratories have been recently accredited to undertake PFC testing. The test is now available for use in Victoria as an alternative to blood testing.

Recommendation 26

That the Government urgently seek and/or provide additional funding for the work on gamma interferon test research.

Victorian Government Response: The national OJD program provides the appropriate mechanism for directing increased funds. The National Coordinator has been sent the committee's recommendations.

Recommendation 27

That testing protocols be significantly improved, including ensuring that the 'evidence chain' is foolproof and that independent verification can be obtained on request, at the cost of the producer, for all positive results.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted and implemented. Field and laboratory procedures have been reviewed to ensure integrity in sample identification throughout the testing process. Independent verification of results can be requested by producers; and will be facilitated by NRE (this option has been available to producers throughout the program).

Recommendation 28

That all test results be confidential and hand delivered to the owner of the infected stock by trained staff.

Victorian Government Response:

- *Accepted - all test results be confidential.*
- *Accepted - all producers need test results in writing; post or fax are also appropriate delivery mechanisms.*

Recommendation 29

That abattoir testing be urgently extended across the whole of the State, with ongoing surveillance systems put in place in all abattoirs.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted in principle. Extension implemented to those major abattoirs slaughtering aged sheep. Not cost-effective to establish surveillance systems where only small numbers of aged sheep are slaughtered. The OJD Advisory Committee at its first meeting, endorsed the expanded abattoir monitoring program now in place. In the long term, the cost of this monitoring program will need to be considered in the context of the overall veterinary services expenditure, having regard to overall government priorities for agriculture.

Recommendation 30

That all abattoir test results be provided to the relevant producer as well as the Department of Natural Resources and Environment for determination of regional infection status and identification of the source of infected flocks.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted in principle to determine regional infection status. Full and effective implementation requires a sheep identification system.

Recommendation 31

That protocols be prepared as a matter of urgency to ensure that there be adequate hygiene practices to ensure that the facilities for transport, sale or slaughter of sheep are not a source of *M. paratuberculosis* contamination. Such protocols to be developed in conjunction with the Environment Protection Authority (EPA), saleyard managers, transport industry, agricultural show personnel and producer groups.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. Referred to Livestock Industry Consultative Committee (LICC) for development of protocols.

Recommendation 32

That an intensive and ongoing information and education program be initiated and monitoring and surveillance systems created and used to provide feedback for continual improvement of systems.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. The resourcing implication of this recommendation needs to be assessed in the context of any other recommendations by the Advisory Committee, and will be considered through the normal budget processes having due regard for the overall government priorities for agriculture.

Recommendation 33

That compensation be reinstated for all those producers who choose to destock infected flocks and decontaminate their total property or, subject to an approved property disease control plan that provides for OJD eradication being in place, a defined part/s of their property.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 34

That the levy system be retained and the Government give consideration to increasing the levy rate, in consultation with industry, to reduce the period of debt.

Victorian Government Response: The levy system has been retained as recommended. Any increase has been referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 35

That further investigation be undertaken into mechanisms to offer studs and 'commercial breeders' unaffected market-based compensation rather than a flat-rate value compensation. Such mechanisms may require the introduction of a levy scheme based on a percentage of sale price rather than the current flat rate based scheme.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 36

That compensation be provided for flocks 'under surveillance' that have substantially diminished income due to trading restrictions particularly registered studs and 'commercial breeders'. Further investigation and consultation be undertaken to determine appropriate levels of compensation, guidelines for eligibility and funding sources.

Victorian Government Response: This is an issue for industry. The provision of compensation for consequential loss has not been accepted as a role for industry or government in animal disease control programs in Australia.

Recommendation 37

That an independent compensation appeals mechanism be put in place as an immediate priority.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 38

That the Rural Finance Corporation's 'OJD Loan Scheme' be continued with a wider range of financial support mechanisms to be offered by the Government, including no, low or suspended interest loans - for those who have destocked as well as those prevented from trading while under 'suspect' status quarantine or are subject to trading restrictions while 'under surveillance'.

Victorian Government Response: The scheme is still currently available. The role of the scheme in the longer term has been referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 39

That assistance be given to affected producers to identify funding sources for capital works such as fencing and sheds allied to on-farm management as part of Property Disease Control Plans.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 40

That the Government subsidise artificial breeding programs of infected flocks to retain genetic resources as a preliminary to destocking and to enable studs to continue trading.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 41

That the Government actively seek the involvement and assistance of insurance, banking and other financial institutions in assisting OJD-affected farmers and ensure that high-quality information is made available to such organisations about the implications of the various control strategies available in Victoria.

Victorian Government Response: The Minister will directly inform relevant insurance banking and financial institutions of the final control strategies implemented in Victoria. (Also referred to Advisory Committee for additional advice by 30 June 2001).

Recommendation 42

That the Government, together with industry, promote self-help groups by providing funding for facilitators.

Victorian Government Response: The government is currently providing counselling through the Community Connections service. Other programs that may currently assist include Bestwool and other organised focus groups of producers. (Also referred to Advisory Committee for additional advice by 30 June 2001).

Recommendation 43

That industry promote ways to help with locating clean fodder and agistment of OJD-free sheep while properties or parts of properties are being decontaminated.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 44

That support be continued for free farm business planning and the preparation of Property Disease Control Plans through Farm\$mart, the Rural Financial Counselling Program and Department of Natural Resources and Environment initiatives.

Victorian Government Response: These programs are continuing. Their role in the context of the future OJD program in Victoria is referred to OJD Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 45

That the provision of advice and counselling services, as currently provided for in the Community Connections contract, be maintained, but revised to ensure that local contracted counsellors make personal contact with all affected producers referred to them.

Victorian Government Response: The current services allow for personal contact, however, this must be at the choice of the farmer. It should not be required if the producer does not desire such contact.

Recommendation 46

That additional local support programs and structures be developed in consultation with the affected communities, as well as with local government and professional bodies working in the communities. Separate support programs may be required for those involved with the delivery of the Victorian OJD Control Program.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 47

That support facilities provide a range of specialist services, from crisis intervention to regular and accessible loss and grief counselling for individuals and/or groups.

Victorian Government Response: This can be facilitated through Community Connections. (Also referred to Advisory Committee for additional advice by 30 June 2001).

Recommendation 48

That ongoing independent evaluation of support structures be used to determine usage patterns and perceptions of efficiency in terms of individuals establishing and managing a positive and productive pathway through their experiences of loss and grief.

Victorian Government Response: All counselling and assistance services will be evaluated to ensure effective services are being offered. (Also referred to Advisory Committee for additional advice by 30 June 2001).

Recommendation 49

That Departmental staff involved with face-to-face program delivery be trained in communication and social counselling skills and in all aspects of the Victorian OJD Control Program.

Victorian Government Response: There is an ongoing training program implemented for staff regarding communication and negotiation, and all aspects of the program. Specialist counsellors have been engaged to deal with social counselling issues.

Recommendation 50

That an independent, trained, professional social counsellor accompany veterinary staff when the initial contact with producers is made to inform them that their property has been confirmed as infected with OJD. The Committee notes that this may require change to current regulations.

Victorian Government Response: Referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 51

That the necessary notification of neighbours and clients of infected flocks be undertaken by officers of the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, on request from the affected producer.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted and implemented.

Recommendation 52

That, on request, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment undertake or arrange the destruction of livestock from infected flocks that are not otherwise able to be sold.

Victorian Government Response: The Department has played a role to assist farmers in this way to date. This matter is referred to Advisory Committee for advice by 30 June 2001, in the context of the overall program which the Committee will recommend.

Recommendation 53

That the Government assist industry to create a regularly updated listing of Market Assurance Program accredited flocks and that this listing be made generally available to assist producers source sheep for restocking. To this end, the Department should liaise with industry and stock agents to obtain such information.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted and implemented. A regularly updated list of accredited flocks is now available on the Animal Health Australia website (at www.aahc.com.au). Producers without direct access to the internet can obtain listings through NRE district officers, or accredited veterinary practitioners in their district.

Recommendation 54

That the Department continue to reimburse affected producers the cost of testing untested flocks being considered for restocking.

Victorian Government Response: This has been continued and referred to Advisory Committee for further advice by 30 June 2001.

Recommendation 55

That the State of Victoria seek an increased emphasis by the National OJD Program on the research of methods to maintain the genetic resources of destocked and quarantined flocks.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. Victoria has direct representation on the National Program Advisory Committee and the associated Technical Sub-Committee. Direct representations will be made through those channels. Research into the risks of various genetic preservation methods, including artificial insemination, has commenced.

Recommendation 56

That Victoria remain an active participant in the National OJD Program.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted and implemented.

Recommendation 57

That Victoria should be a strong advocate of research into and application of techniques for obtaining disease-distribution data, as well as research into techniques that will assist identification of the disease in recently infected sheep and research into the rate of spread within flocks. Research into cross-species infection of OJD and bovine Johne's disease in sheep should also be given a high priority.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted. These are areas of research which have been identified and allocated priority under the R&D component of the National OJD Program.

Recommendation 58

That the State of Victoria maintain active liaison with the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) to ensure that quarantine controls are adequate to ensure that there is minimal risk of OJD-infected sheep entering Australia in the future.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted and implemented.

Recommendation 59

That the Committee's recommended Control Strategy be reviewed if and when a nationally agreed OJD Control Strategy is in place and/or when a test is available that picks up infection prior to the shedding of bacteria and/or when a vaccine is available that will prevent infection.

Victorian Government Response: Accepted.

KEITH HAMILTON MP
Minister for Agriculture