

Callowie recoups from OJD fallout

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Richard and Jacquie Halliday with a mob of their younger retained and now vaccinated ewes with lambs at Callowie. They are working their way back from the devastation of having detected OJD in one of their ewes in 2012.

THE Halliday family has been breeding Poll Merino sheep at Callowie for four generations. Their Callowie Poll Merino stud, north of Bordertown in the south east of South Australia, was first registered in 1990 and they started annual ram sales in 2005.

Besides sourcing top quality genetics to fit their breeding objectives, principals Richard and Jacquie Halliday and their family have been meticulous about animal health issues, having participated in the national ovine Johnes market assurance program from its inception in 1997 – their property has MN3 status.

Therefore, it came as a huge 'hit between the eyes' when a routine testing as part of the program in 2012 showed up a positive case.

One ewe – a visually healthy one at that – was diagnosed as having OJD about a month before their eighth annual ram sale. Richard and Jacquie were angry at first. They wanted answers and, to some extent, still do.

While the penalties for getting diagnosed with the disease far outweighed any loss of production in their case, their industry focus and survival instincts soon kicked in and they began to work on solutions.

"The worst part of the process was the long three-month wait on results from the pooled faecal culture testing; just not knowing what our situation was and not being able to work out a path of resolution was very stressful," Jacquie said.

With the help of local district veterinary officer Peter Nosworthy, they worked on a detailed investigation and analysis to find the extent of the infection, and the cause.

Fortunately, as a result of industry pressure, the waiting period for results from a new accelerated testing process is now only 10 days.

The investigation eventually identified a neighbouring sheep trading property as the likely source, but the only explainable cause for its introduction was most likely a rare water flow event – that happens once in a hundred years – transferring the disease from the source property to the Hallidays' Callowie property.

All subsequent testing has shown that no other sheep had contracted the disease apart from that one ewe.

The timing could not have been worse economically. Their ram sale was initially delayed, then cancelled.

"We suffered a 99.5 per cent loss of income from those rams. We were excited as they were the best group we'd bred, but our income went from a \$1000 average in 2011 to just \$50 when they were sold for slaughter," Richard said.

"I'm a 'glass half full' type of person and while we were emotionally distraught, to get out of our situation we needed to come up with a plan, despite there being only that one detection from all the testing.

"Part of the process was asking 'what ifs?' and I think everyone should do this, whether they have a crisis or not."

The Hallidays drew up five different in-depth economic analyses, ranging from walking away through to starting again. They talked about these options in depth with their bank manager and Peter, and with agribusiness consultant Ken Solly.

"Ken was a huge help. His independent thinking and voice cleared the fog," Jacquie said.

Richard said they were not giving up just yet.

"Merino sheep breeding is our passion and what we have done well, and we were encouraged to continue to do just that," he said.

"We have age and enthusiasm on our side and decided to have another crack at it and beat this thing."

As a result, the following actions were undertaken:

- All ewes and lambs in the mob the infected ewe came from were sold to slaughter.
- All ewes MORE THAN 3.5 years of age were also sold to slaughter. This has impacted on the 2014 lambing percentage with a younger lambing flock overall.
- Vaccinated all other sheep retained on the property together with MAP.
- Instigated a property plan which is a living and flexible document with the 'what ifs' built in.
- Altered their biosecurity plan and no longer run sheep on the south side of a sand ridge where any water could again flow in from the neighbouring source in a very wet year.
- Bought more than 300 ewes of quality equal to, or better than, what they had before from Wanganella, Greenfields and Flairdale (all MN3 studs with bloodlines used previously). These ewes are agisted on a 'clean' property 40 kilometres away and have been inseminated to Callowie 'Pugsley' and 'Orange 3' by Brecon Breeders.
- Kept their 12 best 2011-drop rams and mated them to retained ewes on the home property.
- Used the 'down time' to instigate measurements for Merino Select.
- Working towards reviving their annual ram sale in August 2014, with progeny of the bought-in ewes run on the lease property and they will have ASBVs. The lambs on the lease property are now classified as 'MN2 approved vaccinates'. The optimum classification is 'MN3 approved vaccinates' and they require one more clear test in 12 months' time to allow them to achieve that.

The sheep retained on the home property need two more summers and then a clear result on testing to clear the property.

Richard said he wanted to undertake testing this year just to keep on top with his knowledge of their situation.

"This whole saga is a hardship we certainly didn't need, but it has possibly been to both of our advantages", he said.

"It has focused us to look at the big picture, work together better and plan for the future. We are actually going to shear more sheep this year than last."

There are many lessons to be learnt from Halliday's situation.

"For the Halliday's the salient lesson is that if they had been supporting their monitoring regime with immunization through vaccination, it may never have happened," Peter said.

Richard said producers needed to get the right mindset with biosecurity.

“Do you have an industry focused mindset in that you undertake biosecurity plans and monitoring because you want to genuinely restrict the chance of getting this, or other diseases, or just because you have to,” he said.

“Also never take anything for granted. Look at your own risk assessment and that of all your neighbours. If you cannot guarantee every conceivable problem is covered, if there is one box you can’t tick, then vaccinate.

We thought rigid monitoring would cover it and we were wrong.”

Richard said it was important to realize that vaccination was not a cure, a point reiterated by Peter.

“Vaccination is 90 percent effective. There isn’t one vaccine around in animal or human health that is 100pc effective,” Peter said.

“Working on a monitoring program in combination with vaccination will make the likelihood of breakdown exceedingly low.”