Animal Health Update

Virulent Footrot (VFR)
by District Veterinarian Emily Stearman

Recently some of the Riverina District Veterinarians and Biosecurity Officers attended a two day VFR Discussion and Training Meeting in the South East Region. VFR within our local area has been well controlled with only small number properties under quarantine. However, we have been receiving many VFR traces from other areas.

A significant amount of work has been done over the past 15-20 years to reduce the amount of Virulent Footrot seen on sheep properties in NSW. The number of properties under quarantine for VFR has reduced from ~6,000 at the start of the VFR Campaign, to ~60 farms across NSW today.

There has been much discussion amongst veterinarians and producers about the presentation of clinical signs of VFR. With the amount of VFR eradication work done in NSW, some of the ‘hot virulent’ strains of VFR are less commonly seen. Often we are faced with more subtle virulent strains that result in severe underrunning of the hoof but present with a less crippling lameness than was seen years ago.

Seasonal conditions at the start of spring this year trended to a high risk period for VFR breakdown. However without any significant or generalized spring rain, conditions dried quickly. While most of the area is currently at low risk of VFR spread it is important to note if you have significant numbers of lame sheep or are suspicious of any recently introduced stock, contact your district veterinarian to discuss any concerns.

Curious cattle and bracken fern toxicity
by District Veterinarian Tim Biffin

A case of 15% mortalities in a mob of young steers was investigated in the eastern hilly country of the Riverina Local Land Services region. Deaths had commenced approximately two weeks after introduction of the livestock to the new paddock, and continued for approximately four weeks (amounting to a total of over 20 dead out of 170 head).

From disease investigation (see photos) bracken fern (Pteridium aquilinum var esculentum) was identified as the cause of the disease. This is a plant generally found in hilly country, preferring higher rainfalls and well-drained soil (eg throughout the Adelong hills). In addition to its toxic qualities the weed can be a significant pasture species competitor.

Although palatability and toxicity will vary with season, the rhizomes (roots) and fresh growing shoots have the highest concentrations of toxin. Therefore, livestock exposed to bracken that has been burnt, slashed or ploughed are at higher risk due to exposure of the rhizomes and fresh regrowth.

Generally the plant is avoided by livestock; however, they may be driven to graze bracken out of curiosity (introductions of young naïve stock), hunger (lack of quality feed provisions), and less commonly requirements for roughage (very lush pasture without provision of any roughage fodder).

There are two distinct syndromes which may present: an acute (sudden) and a chronic (long term) form. The acute syndrome is more common and usually expresses after stock have had access to the plant for at least one week. The toxin affects the bone marrow, which has an important role in red and white blood cell growth.
production. Subsequently affected animals are susceptible to infection and have difficulty clotting their blood. Symptoms may include variations of fever, diarrhoea, difficulty breathing, listlessness, red urine, haemorrhages into tissues, and death.

Chronic toxicity is produced from the toxin’s carcinogenic qualities and most commonly results in cancer of the urinary bladder. Symptoms usually include red urine (sometimes with blood clots), loss of condition, listlessness progressing slowly to death.

**Did you Know…?**

*by Regional Veterinarian Eliz Braddon*

Australia monitors mosquito populations (and other midges) as a way to protect our export markets for livestock but also to protect ourselves. Viruses called “Arboviruses” use insects to spread themselves around. As it is often difficult to monitor the viruses effectively, Australia monitors the insects that spread them as well. Some examples of livestock arboviruses that you may have heard of are Bluetongue, Akabane and Bovine Ephemeral Fever. In the human world, illnesses such as Ross River Fever, Murray Valley Encephalitis and Malaria are all examples of diseases that are viruses that spread by mosquitoes.

For our animal friends, the National Arbovirus Monitoring Program (NAMP) provides surveillance of these arboviruses through regular sample collection in sentinel herds as well as insect trapping near these herds. These herds are spread throughout Australia and allow for specific maps to be created that outline where these diseases may occur in Australia. This in turn allows livestock to be certified as to their risk.

For example, in our Riverina area of NSW, we are in the Bluetongue Free Zone so our sheep and cattle are easily certified for this requirement by countries requiring this assurance.

Taking it one step further the Department of Health also monitors populations of mosquitoes to assist health authorities to predict the risk of human arboviral outbreaks.

The current monitoring reveals that at this point in the summer, mosquito numbers are remaining relatively steady. Within the Riverina Local Land Service area, we have both cattle sentinel herds that we regularly sample throughout the year for monitoring as well as a number of human monitoring sites that the NSW Health Department staff manage.

So the next time you hear about cases of Bovine Ephemeral Fever in cattle or hear reports advising you to use insect repellent at the next family barbeque, it may be related to the National Arbovirus Monitoring Program surveillance occurring quietly behind the scenes!

*Who knew biosecurity occurs every day and in many ways.*
Blowfly season
by District Veterinarian Tim Biffin

With current warm conditions you may have noticed an increase in table flies around the home. It is a safe assumption that such conditions breed blow fly as well, and from inspecting stock throughout the Riverina an increased incidence of fly strike has been noticed. Although it has not proven to be a particularly bad season as yet, with ongoing harvest some producers may be distracted from inspecting stock. Affected sheep are best treated early to maintain production and welfare of those animals and minimise the level of strike that may occur in other sheep. Blow flies do not travel far, and management practices exist to minimise the level of fly burden, thus, producers should be aware that generally they breed their own flies.

Management plans to reduce the risk of fly strike should include consideration of non-chemical and chemical control methods, as a combination of the two will maximise effectiveness. The most important risk factors for fly strike in sheep are breech cover, breech wrinkle, dag levels and fleece rot. Timing shearing and crutching strategically to reduce breech cover and dag in high risk times of year will help to prevent fly strike. Worm burdens and scouring will increase amount of dag, and so are important to control as they can put sheep at higher risk of fly strike.

There are a number of different chemical control methods that may be used in conjunction with non-chemical control methods. Be aware of withholding periods and wool residues when deciding on a chemical control product. Insecticides must be properly applied if they are to be effective, so ensure that the labelled directions are followed correctly. Wet weather will reduce the duration of effectiveness of these chemicals.

Regular monitoring of flocks, particularly during high risk periods when weather conditions are ideal, is important in managing cases of fly strike. Affected sheep should be removed from the flock for immediate treatment, as they will attract more flies and put other animals in the flock at risk.

Merry Christmas from the staff at Riverina Local Land Services
We would like to wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a safe and happy New Year.

The offices of Riverina Local Land Services will be closed from Thursday 24 December 2015 and will reopen on Monday 4 January 2016.

If you have a livestock health issue, and it is not an emergency, please contact your nearest private veterinary practitioner.

If you have a suspect plant or plant disease please ring Exotic Plant Pest Hotline on 1800 084 881

If you suspect that you have exotic emergency animal disease, please contact the Emergency Animal Disease hotline on 1800 675 888

RSPCA (For animal welfare emergencies) 1300 CRUELTY or 1300 278 3589

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