



Biosecurity for South Australian sheep producers

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Biosecurity means keeping unwanted diseases, parasites and weeds off your property and away from your sheep.

The consequences of an outbreak of a disease or pest can range from lost production to financial devastation, quarantine and time consuming eradication or control programs. The entry of many diseases and pests to your property can be prevented by undertaking some simple biosecurity measures. Even though some diseases and pests are spread by wind or water, which we can't control, being aware of biosecurity on your property can enable you to minimise the spread of disease in those areas you can control, and can make sure you are alerted to its presence early.

New Arrivals

The biggest risk of introducing diseases and pests to your property is through purchasing sheep. Even sheep which appear to be in good health can introduce diseases such as Ovine Johnes Disease (OJD), drench-resistant worms, or weed seeds.

When purchasing sheep, always check the Animal Health Statement. In South Australia, it is required that all sheep be sold with a completed Animal Health Statement, which provides information on diseases such as OJD, Footrot, Lice and Ovine Brucellosis. Always purchase sheep with an OJD score at least equal to or higher than your property's score – the higher the score, the lower the risk of introducing OJD. Presenting sheep with lice or footrot in a saleyard in South Australia attracts a fine, but it is always prudent to check sheep yourself.

If possible, find out if the vendor of the sheep has a property biosecurity plan. This is a good sign they take the health of their stock seriously. Also, check whether any preventative health measures such as vaccination, drenching or backlining have been done, and which chemicals were used.

Isolation

Once sheep have been purchased, they should undergo a period of quarantine before mixing with your own stock. The length of time will depend on the stock and your circumstances, but should be a minimum of 48 hours and can be up to six weeks in some circumstances. Check with your veterinarian or local PIRSA Animal Health staff member for an appropriate period for your circumstances.

Quarantine should occur in a designated area with good fences to prevent any early escapes. A period of separation allows for the identification of any illness and the removal of weed seeds from the gut, before these are released onto the property at large. Sheep arriving on a property should also be drenched on arrival with an effective drench from each drench class (white, clear and ivomec), to reduce the risk of introducing drench-resistant worms to the property.

Should disease be detected in stock in the isolation paddock, this paddock should be cropped or used for non-susceptible animals until the disease or pest has been controlled and the paddock is safe for sheep again, so care should be taken in its selection. The quarantine paddock should also be close to any sheds or yards, to prevent stock in isolation moving through other paddocks. Quarantined sheep should always use sheds and yards after stock already present on the property.

Fencing and Stray Animals

All the precautions in the world will not help you if you don't have good fences. Good fences keep your stock in, and other stock, which may spread diseases and weeds, out. Boundary fences should be inspected regularly to ensure they are stockproof, and repaired if needed. Strong internal fencing takes the pressure off the external fences, so internal fencing should not be neglected.

If you find stray sheep on your property, immediately isolate them from other stock (in the raised part of the shearing shed is best), and find the owner. Ascertain from them the risk of your sheep having been exposed to diseases, and bring boundary fence maintenance into the discussion if necessary. Moving a stray back over the fence into the presumed paddock of origin is unwise— the sheep may have come from elsewhere, and could create biosecurity issues for both sides of the fence.

Stray cattle may also spread disease, as can feral animals such as goats, dogs and deer. A feral animal control plan is an important part of property biosecurity.

Feed and Water

When buying in feed, it's always worth checking for the presence of weeds and any disease threats. For example, the toxin which causes Annual Ryegrass Toxicity can persist in hay for many years – ask if the hay has been tested, and what the results were. When feeding out, it's desirable to try and limit this to a few locations on the property. That way, if weeds do appear, they can be more easily controlled.

Water sources, especially dams, creeks or rivers, can be contaminated by animal carcasses, agricultural chemicals or manure. Be aware of who lives upstream and check water quality regularly.

Visitors and Equipment

Visitors to a property can bring disease with them, especially if they have recently visited other stock. It's good practice for anyone visiting a property to disinfect and clean their boots, and change into clean work clothes, before having contact with animals. Obviously, this need not apply to social or business visitors who will not be going outside of the house grounds.

Similarly, if workers on the property visit other properties, saleyards or other places that stock gather, it is important that boots be disinfected and clothes changed before their return.

To ensure that any visitors are aware of the precautions you have in place, consider placing a sign on the main entrance gate, requesting that visitors come directly to the house before having any contact with stock. Providing boots for visitors may be the easiest solution.

Just as diseases can be carried on boots and clothes, tyres and machinery can also be a problem. The undercarriage of visiting vehicles and machinery should be inspected for weeds and soil, and thorough cleaning carried out, especially of tillage implements.

If possible, visiting vehicles should be left near buildings and only farm vehicles should be allowed onto paddocks. Otherwise, spraying the vehicle, with a disinfectant solution and cleaning tyres may be worthwhile. Even a good old fashioned hosing down has some merit.

Visiting Animals

Animals visiting the property on agistment should be clearly identified, and be kept separate from your own stock. Agisted animals are just as big a threat as any other foreign animals. Think very carefully before agreeing to agist stock. Enquire as to the health status (particularly with regards OJD) of the stock, and only agree to agistment if they pose minimal risk (i.e. of the same or better health status as your own stock). If possible, agistment paddocks should be spelled for several months or cropped before your own stock use them again, regardless of the health status of the agisted stock.

If you send your own stock to agistment, they too should only go to a property of equal or better health status, and when they return they should be drenched and undergo a period of quarantine, as though they were newly purchased.

It should be ensured that any visiting dogs are regularly treated for tapeworm, to reduce the risk of Hydatid disease. It is a requirement these days for dogs to be tied to the transporting vehicle, and this is one area of biosecurity often overlooked.

Sick or Dead Animals

Inspect your sheep regularly, and familiarise yourself with their normal behaviour and habits. If any stock are noticed behaving strangely or signs with of illness, it is prudent to isolate them from healthy stock. This will help prevent sickness spreading if a contagious disease is involved. Any signs of illness should be investigated, particularly if large numbers of stock are involved or unusual signs are seen. Your local veterinarian or PIRSA Animal Health staff member can provide advice on finding the cause, and help you to minimise further losses and disease.

If dead sheep are found, the numbers, location and any relevant circumstances should be noted for farm records, and then the carcasses disposed of securely. Remains of sheep killed on-farm for humane reasons or human consumption should also be disposed of securely. It is best to put dead stock into a deep burial pit with a lid. This prevents feral animals accessing the carcasses and spreading disease. It can also help reduce blowfly numbers. The site of the pit should be carefully selected so that groundwater is not contaminated. Any kind of burial is better than dumping carcasses in the scrub or leaving them in the paddock.

Prepare a Plan

Having a biosecurity plan for your property will help you minimise the risk of introducing diseases or pests. The plan should incorporate procedures for buying or agisting sheep and other stock, sharing machinery, or having visitors on your property. It should also specify what will be done with sick or dead animals. Even a minor incident could have significant costs to your business, so prevention is better than cure.

Sharing is a common and neighbourly trait amongst the Australian farming community, but it carries risks that should be addressed. Having a solid biosecurity plan will make you a good neighbour AND protect the biosecurity of your enterprise.

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