

07 December 2012
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OJD stoush to worsen



THE stoush over proposed changes to national management of Ovine Johne's Disease will get even more heated during a six-month delay to its start date as producers outraged by the plan vow to fight even harder to overturn the amendments once and for all.

Industry reaction to the delay – announced in a joint statement on Monday by WoolProducers Australia and Sheepmeat Council of Australia - was mixed.

The Victorian Farmers Federation claimed it was a win for common sense. But Frank Tobin – who is heading up the industry committee formed out of last month's Australian Wool Innovation meeting – said the announcement only added to growers' confusion about what they should do about the changes.

Some members of the group have funded their own adverts in Fairfax Agricultural Media newspapers The Land in New South Wales and Stock & Land in Victoria this week outlining where they believe the OJD program has gone wrong.

The decision to delay the start date was made at a phone hook-up of SCA and WPA representatives last week, with details ironed out over the weekend. A transition period for the new rules has been extended until July 1, 2013.

In the statement, WPA and SCA said the extension reflected recent industry concern about the new changes. It said many issues had been raised that needed to be considered, particularly the lack of recognition for vaccinated sheep.

“The six-month extension provides time for these concerns to be considered. Both councils are committed to implementing a practical and technically sound plan to reduce the spread of OJD,” the statement said.

“Both WPA and SCA have always and continue to strongly support the use of vaccination as a management tool in the control of OJD.”

The statement concluded by telling producers who had prepared for the January 1 start date that they could implement their individual biosecurity plan at any stage.

Mr Tobin said it sounded as though the two lobby groups were only delaying the start date. He did not believe adequate time to fully consider growers' concerns had been allowed.



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He said the decision only added to growers' confusion because they could prepare for the changes to be implemented on July 1, 2013, and have another amendment to the plan that would mean all that effort was for nothing.

He said growers were in a quandary because they needed to make decisions now on whether it was worthwhile vaccinating spring-drop lambs and whether they would be recognised under the program or whether they should join the market assurance program – decisions that could cost thousands of dollars.

“We don't need to wait six months,” he said.

“The clear decision that needed to be made was saying we misread industry views, the communication strategy wasn't sufficient and recognise that industry wants to stick with the existing program.

“It's a recipe for a massive conflict. Anyone watching from the outside will struggle to understand what they need to do over the next two to three months.”

The chief executives of both organisations – WPA's Jane Brownbill and SCA's Ron Cullen – took carriage of commenting on the changes this week, rather than chairmen Geoff Power and Ian McColl, who had previously dealt with much of the heat from angry producers.

Ms Brownbill said the extension was an opportunity to listen to people's concerns, and it was a “responsible decision”. More detail would be provided in 2013 about the next step in the process.

She did not rule out that the proposed changes could be amended, but said “we will continue to talk to people”.

Those people included the entire industry – the group headed by Mr Tobin, state farming organisations, and breeders.

Mr Cullen growers who had started individual biosecurity plans could progress these, as opposed to regional biosecurity plans flagged in the changes. He would not elaborate on details of the next steps that WPA and SCA would undertake early next year.

Ross Wells, Willandra, west of Jerilderie, NSW, is a member of Mr Tobin's group and has stridently opposed the proposed changes from the outset.

He said putting the program back six months would not help its acceptance and it was a difficult time of year to progress negotiations with harvest in full swing and Christmas approaching.

“There will be more battles along the way before the issue is sorted out,” he said. “I don't think the industry will be happy with the plan put before them.

“The people I feel most for are those who were so damaged by the last program and they have been put on the backburner again. It was absolute trauma for a lot of people.”

The Victorian Farmers Federation was among the first in the industry to call for a six-month postponement to the start date. It claimed the delay as a win in the first stage of a battle to defer and amend the proposed changes.

VFF livestock president Ian Feldtmann said the decision was great news for sheep producers and gave the industry time to come to a “more sensible solution”.



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“I’d like to thank the 556 sheep producers who signed our petition opposing the new rules and all those who attended our OJD forums. As they say it’s a victory for common sense,” he said.

“We also appreciate Victorian Agriculture Minister Peter Walsh’s support.”

WoolProducers and SCA reiterated that in developing the changes there was extensive public consultation indicating strong support for a national plan; the industry worked with government and sought independent technical advice; and a key concern was shedding could still occur in infected vaccinated animals.