

Ovine Brucellosis – reducing the risk.

By Trisha Esson.

Ovine Brucellosis (OB) What is it?

Ovine Brucellosis is a highly infectious bacterial disease, which if present in your flock can be costly. The disease causes reduced fertility and even infertility in rams and occasionally causes spontaneous abortion in ewes or the birth of weak lambs.

Brucellosis infected rams usually result in much lower lambing percentages in your flock and can also prolong the lambing period. Translated into monetary terms, the cost can be high to individual producers through lost production.

Unlike many other sheep diseases, there is no vaccine to protect against or treatment to cure Ovine Brucellosis. The disease is spread by infected rams and can be spread from ram to ram when they are in close contact. It can also be spread from an infected ram to a non infected ram when both serve the same ewe. ie it is a sexually transmitted disease of sheep.

It is often possible to feel abnormalities in the testes of infected rams when one palpates their testicles. The disease is confirmed by a blood test of rams suspected of being infected with Ovine Brucellosis. Even rams that appear healthy but have contracted the disease will be revealed by a blood test. Once a ram has contacted the disease it will stay with him. There is no medical treatment to date to cure infected rams. Infected rams should therefore be destroyed. Interestingly, there is no apparent persistence of the disease in ewes from one season to the next.

Reducing the risk of Ovine Brucellosis in your flock

Although there is no vaccine to protect against Ovine Brucellosis there are steps that you can take as a sheep breeder to prevent the disease being introduced into your flock. You can also minimise the risk of Ovine Brucellosis spreading should it get into your flock.

- Buy in rams from Ovine Brucellosis Accredited flocks only. The rams from these flock are blood tested regularly and are found to be free of Ovine Brucellosis.
- If you buy a ram/s from a non Accredited flock, then it is a good idea to quarantine the ram/s and blood test them before allowing them to mix with your flock.
- Maintain ram proof fences. You don't want a neighbours ram to “visit” and infect your flock.
- Keep rams in small groups. This means that fewer rams will become infected should infection enter the property. It is important the ensure that the fences between the groups are adequate to contain the rams.
- Any purchased ewes should be isolated for 6 weeks (or until after they have lambed) from other sheep on your property. Unjoined ewe lambs from an OB accredited property would have the least at risk of carrying Ovine Brucellosis if ewes are to be purchased.
- Keep your joining period tight. Rams should be in with the ewes 8 weeks at the very longest (6 weeks is sufficient for Dorpers and White Dorpers). This is because ram lambs older than two months can become infected from the fluids and placenta of a transiently infected ewe. Keeping the joining period short minimizes the risk of ram lambs becoming infected with Ovine Brucellosis.
- Palpate a ram's testicles before purchasing. The lumps caused by Ovine Brucellosis are

usually in the lower part of the testicle. It should be noted that not all testicular lumps are caused by OB. The most common cause of testicular lumps in rams is from a knock or injury.

Further information about Ovine Brucellosis and the Ovine Brucellosis Accreditation scheme can be obtained from your local Department of Agriculture.

Victoria – www.dpi.vic.gov.au or call 136 186 (local call charge)

New South Wales – www.dpi.nsw.gov.au or call 1800 808 095

South Australia – www.pir.sa.gov.au or call (08) 8207 7959

Queensland - www.dpi.qld.gov.au or call 132 523 (Qld residents) or (07) 6404 6999

Tasmania – www.dpiw.tas.gov.au or call 1800 368 550

Western Australia. - www.agric.wa.gov.au or call (08) 9368 3333