



6 November 2012

MEDIA RELEASE

Vet group says scabby mouth will cause more live export rejections

Monday's 4 Corners program, describing yet another disaster for the live export industry, prompts the need to focus on a disease of sheep which is minor in health terms but has major importance as an excuse for rejection of sheep shipments.

Vets Against Live Export (VALE) state that the latest rejection of 20,000 Australian sheep from Bahrain, ending in their brutal killing in Pakistan, illustrates how the much-trumpeted supply chain assurance system, and the inter-government memoranda of understanding, have failed to prevent a large-scale animal welfare disaster.

But what has not been emphasised is the crucial role that scabby mouth disease in sheep has played in determining whether or not importing countries in the Middle East reject shipments. History has shown that those rejections result in repeated and significant animal welfare disasters. The scabby mouth excuse can be brought into play by the importing country at will. It is clear that many shipments with scabby mouth are in fact accepted, as pointed out in the program by the Chief Veterinary Officer Dr Mark Schipp. The claim by Alison Penfold of the Australian Livestock Exporters' Council that this is an "isolated incident" is in our view untrue. Sheep shipments have been rejected because of claims they are infected with scabby mouth over and over again for decades. Scabby mouth was the "reason" for this particular disaster and also that of the *Cormo Express* in which nearly 6000 sheep died before the Australian government gifted the rejected sheep to Eritrea.

In the 4 Corners program, both the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), Phillip Glyde, and the Chief Veterinary Officer played down the importance of scabby mouth disease in live export sheep. Dr Schipp described the disease as unimportant and Mr Glyde reinforced this when he said that it was not a requirement of importing countries that sheep be free of scabby mouth. The exporter, Wellard, has made a similar statement to the effect that scabby mouth is unimportant.

VALE spokesperson Dr Sue Foster says “These statements miss the point. In the late 1990s, scabby mouth in Australian sheep was seen by the biggest export market, Saudi Arabia, as so important that several shipments were rejected and eventually the trade ceased.”

The only way live exporters and the Australian Government could restart the trade was to ensure that sheep going to Saudi Arabia were vaccinated against scabby mouth. The law that requires the scabby mouth vaccination is still in place. Also, a live exporter is obliged by law to reject any sheep showing signs of scabby mouth from a shipment. So it is simply wrong to claim that scabby mouth is unimportant, because regardless of what the Australian Government says, the presence of scabby mouth allows importing countries to reject sheep shipments at any time.

Scabby mouth is highly contagious and widespread. Even if all sheep showing signs of the disease are filtered out, there will still be sheep on live export ships that carry the disease. The importance of this is illustrated in the *2001 Handbook for Shipboard Veterinarians* on live export voyages going to Saudi Arabia, which says that conditions on the ships are “...ideal for scabby mouth spread.” In other words, the disease cannot be eradicated from live export ships and will continue to be used as justification for rejection of shipments for political or commercial reasons while this trade continues. So far as animal welfare is concerned, the consequences of this clinically minor disease are therefore profound indeed.

It is VALE’s view that claiming that scabby mouth is unimportant graphically illustrates how, in order to protect this trade, the government, the Chief Veterinary Officer and the exporter are prepared to rewrite and misrepresent history.

ENDS

For more information contact Dr Sue Foster on 0423 783 689, info@vale.org.au