

ELECTRONIC NLIS (SHEEP) TAGS NOW AVAILABLE

For more than a 100 years Victoria has remained free from Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD). This is largely because of Victoria's unrelenting vigilance and biosecurity measures. To protect our sheep, goat, beef, dairy and pig industries against the devastating impact of a disease such as FMD, Victoria needs the capacity to be able to quickly locate and detain potentially infected animals in a disease outbreak. To achieve this we need an effective identification and tracking system for sheep and goats.

Sheep were responsible for the spread of FMD during an outbreak in the United Kingdom in 2001. This outbreak cost livestock industries and the governments of affected countries over £3 billion. The UK example is a timely warning of what could happen here.

A national sheep tracking exercise known as *'Sheepcatcher'*, held in August 2007, confirmed that the existing National Livestock Identification System for sheep (known as the NLIS (Sheep & Goats)) has significant limitations. It is based on visually readable tags and associated paper-based movement records. As was demonstrated during *'Sheepcatcher'*, considerable resources are required to physically locate paperwork and then trace sheep of interest.

'Sheepcatcher' clearly shows that major changes to the NLIS (Sheep & Goats) need to be made in order to achieve a robust system which is able to be used effectively during a large scale disease or food safety emergency.

The performance of the NLIS (Sheep & Goats) system during *'Sheepcatcher'* contrasts with the performance of the NLIS (Cattle) system during the *'Cowcatcher II'* exercise held in early 2007. Because all States now have implemented NLIS (Cattle), almost 99 percent of cattle were traced back to their property of birth within 24 hours.

An enhancement to the NLIS (Sheep & Goats) that can be quickly introduced is the establishment of a national database for storing National Vendor Declaration images and associated mob based movement information. Victoria has taken the lead by demonstrating that such a national database can be established at minimal cost, benefiting all sectors of the sheep and cattle supply chains. This initiative is now being progressed with industry support by Meat and Livestock Australia.

A further enhancement is the introduction for voluntary use of attractively priced electronic NLIS (Sheep) tags. From Wednesday 28

November 2007, the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) will commence supplying electronic NLIS (Sheep) tags at a subsidised retail price of \$1.35 per tag. DPI is confident that this is a sustainable price.

There has been considerable producer interest for some time in the use of electronic identification technology for flock management purposes because of the significant limitations of tags that can only be read visually. However tag prices in the order of \$2.50 per tag have discouraged uptake.

In addition, wool growers and sheep meat producers will be able to apply for a Victorian Government dollar for dollar grant of up to \$2,500 to assist with the purchase of readers, software and technical support.

Victoria's Sheep and Goat Identification Advisory Committee (SIAC) includes representatives of all stakeholder groups and advises DPI on the operation of the NLIS (Sheep & Goats). SIAC supports the voluntary use of electronic tags, and has agreed to oversee the introduction of electronic technology within all sectors of Victoria's sheep industry.

Victorian producers who choose to purchase electronic NLIS (Sheep) tags will not be required to also

attach a visually readable NLIS (Sheep) tag. Each electronic tag will be printed with a visually readable Property Identification Code (PIC) and serial number.

Electronic NLIS (Sheep) tags are being introduced by DPI for use on a voluntary basis. There is no plan to make the use of electronic tags mandatory for sheep identification purposes. As occurred in Victoria during the development and implementation of the NLIS system for cattle, industry working in partnership with Government will determine the future role of electronic technology in the operation of the NLIS (Sheep & Goats).

For information on electronic NLIS (Sheep) tags, producer grants and the use of electronic technology for flock management purposes, visit DPI's web site at www.dpi.vic.gov.au/nlis, or call NLIS Helpline on 1800 678 779 during business hours.

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