

Fact sheet

Investigating animal health and diseases in Australian lamb feedlots



Specialist lamb finishing systems (feedlots) are increasingly being utilised by Australian lamb producers to combat the seasonal fluctuations of nutrient supply in extensive pasture-based systems.

Background

Health concerns in lot fed lambs is an area where limited research has been previously conducted. Beyond the limited inconsistent information on major health concerns in Australia, the occurrence of common diseases was largely unknown and additionally any associations or interactions between diseases were investigated. The main purpose of this project was to determine the causes of health conditions in lambs in feedlots in southern Australia and to determine the risk factors associated with these conditions.

This MLA Donor company project funded in part by Animal Health Australia and research conducted by Charles Sturt University investigated the incidence of health conditions within feedlots to develop appropriate resources to aid feedlotter and producers in managing health issues.

Key findings

- The average mortality rate was 2.9% for the 21 cohorts of lambs surveyed.
- Acidosis, water belly, pulpy kidney, salmonella and pneumonia had the highest incidence within the surveyed animals.
- Key risk factors include:
 - time of year
 - low space (<2.1m²/lamb) allocation
 - rainfall in the previous 24 hours.
- Full vaccination status against clostridial disease was either unknown or incomplete for all cohorts examined and pulpy kidney had a high incidence within this study.
- Antibiotic usage was not common practice in the cohorts investigated. However, multi-drug antibiotic resistance was found highlighting the need for further research into more effective preventive measures when it comes to bacterial infections.

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Recommendations for feedlotter

- **Record animal deaths** from feedlot entry until exit. Further investigation is warranted when deaths exceed 3%. Maintaining a good relationship with your vet is encouraged.
- **Vaccination status** – as the vendor of the vaccination status of the lambs. If lambs are purchased with an unknown clostridial vaccination status, ensure lambs receive at least a 3 in 1 vaccine on entry and a booster 4–6 weeks later.
- **Manging the risk of shy feeding** by:
 - increase the concentrate induction period beyond 7 days
 - utilise induction mob sizes of less than 350 head
 - purchase lambs at a minimum entry weight of 35 kgs.
- **Larger space allocation** of above 5m²/lamb are beneficial for preventing death due to diseases such as acidosis, salmonella and pulpy kidney.

Recommendations for breeding operations

- **Imprinting supplementary feeding** – help reduce shy feeders by imprinting lambs onto supplementary feed with ewes pre weaning. This practice helps ensure lambs become familiar with supplementary feeding and is beneficial for all stock types (animals remaining on farm or animals being backgrounded for feedlots).
- **Vaccination status** – tell your feedlotter the vaccination history of the lambs sold. Best practice vaccination at marking and weaning can help reduce clostridial disease outbreaks during lamb feedlot induction periods, resulting in improved lamb productivity and animal health status during this high risk period.

For more information

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