

TSE programme

New Zealand is free from the transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs) of animals, including bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), scrapie of sheep and goats, and chronic wasting disease of deer (CWD). The European Commission's Geographical BSE Risk Assessment (GBR) has classified New Zealand as a Category 1 country, meaning that it is highly unlikely that New Zealand domestic cattle are infected with the BSE agent.

Recognising the importance of these diseases, MAF made significant additions three years ago to the surveillance programme for the TSEs. The programme is now run under the auspices of MAF and the New Zealand Food Safety Authority (NZFSA). The objectives are to protect human and animal health, ensure that New Zealand's trading position is protected, and to provide leadership, coordination and audit of TSE-related activities.

The TSE Steering Committee oversees all activities. Committee members include representatives from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Research, Science and Technology and senior management, communications and technical MAF and NZFSA staff. The Steering Committee provides a forum for considering 'whole of government' issues and issues that cross portfolios, and works closely with the BSE Liaison Group (see below) on general policy directions.

The BSE Liaison Group is composed of representatives from government departments, industry sectors and consumer groups, and is central to the programme. It receives regular reports about each of the programme elements, and when appropriate determines issues to be taken further and those to be raised with the media.

An Expert Science Panel also monitors developments in the field of TSEs, including diagnostic tests, and provides independent scientific advice to the government.

There are five TSE sub-programmes: science and review, trade risk mitigation, biosecurity and animal health, food standards and communications. However, many issues cross these somewhat arbitrary boundaries and thus cooperative work is the *modus operandi*.

The key activities and outcomes during 2002 were as follows.

Communications

TSE/BSE fact-sheets were developed for rural communities. They were distributed at the Mystery Creek Fieldays (the major agriculture trade fair in New Zealand) and published in the rural press. A comprehensive communications strategy for 2003 and beyond was developed and approved by the Steering Committee.

Food standards

This sub-programme is focused on consumer protection via controls on the entry of foods that contain bovine and bovine

derived components. Clearly there is a common interest with the animal biosecurity group of MAF, and joint meetings are held regularly. During 2002, procedures to categorise BSE country risk were established and two assessments were completed; many more will be finalised during 2003.

Surveillance and surveys in ruminants

Activities in this area fall into three areas: screening of all cases with a history of nervous disease submitted to diagnostic laboratories, abattoir surveys for abnormal brain stem prion protein, and monitoring of imported animals.

Since the beginning of 1990, the MAF Biosecurity Authority has maintained a TSE surveillance and monitoring programme to support international acceptance of our TSE-free status. The programme involves the following components:

- A TSE awareness campaign amongst veterinary practitioners and farmers. In 2002 MAF increased the incentives offered for its TSE Surveillance Programme, and changed to a system of direct payment to farmers and veterinarians (for more information see www.maf.govt.nz/biosecurity/pests-diseases/animals/tse/surveillance-incentives.htm).
- All TSEs have been notifiable since 1993.
- A toll-free phone number to report any cases of suspected exotic disease.
- The National Centre for Disease Investigation supports expert investigation of suspect cases.
- A network of MAF-approved veterinary diagnostic laboratories.
- MAF's Expert Veterinary Pathologist.
- Referral of samples from TSE investigations, when necessary, to international experts overseas.

See Tables 3-5 of the Animal Disease Surveillance Report on page 10 for the results of this screening programme during 2002.

During 2002, 2,853 cattle (~80% 'fallen stock' and ~20% 'emergency slaughter') were subject to testing for abnormal brain stem prion protein using a Western immunoblot assay. In October 2002, a survey of sheep and deer was initiated. By the end of the year, 529 sheep and eight deer had been sampled. All results were negative. This work is continuing and may be expanded.

Currently there are 1,100 imported animals on 222 properties in New Zealand. All are subject to annual inspection and, when presented for slaughter at an abattoir, brain stem testing. Work has begun, with border control staff, to streamline this activity.

Ruminant feed control programme

The feeding of ruminant protein to ruminants is prohibited. Feed mills using ruminant protein ingredients are required to label all their products as prescribed in the regulations. These feed mills may produce feed for ruminants only in accordance with a

registered ruminant protein control programme that is subject to independent verification. During 2002 the regulations supporting this were subject to both industry and public review; this will be completed during 2003. MAF's special investigation group also conducted an audit of the ruminant protein regulations that included visits to pig and poultry farms where ruminants are also kept.

A follow-up testing programme for ruminant protein in animal feeds, both imported and locally produced, has been under study. Currently a two-step procedure involving a screening test with intensive follow-up (audit with more definitive testing) is being evaluated.

Conclusion

Year 2002 was, in many areas, a period of consolidation of the TSE programme. This will allow for an expansion of activities in all sub-programmes during 2003.

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