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Interim OJD test results

Interim laboratory results from veterinary research on Kangaroo Island have shown that two kangaroos and two wallabies have tested positive for the presence of Ovine Johne's disease (OJD) bacteria.

However, PIRSA Veterinarian Dr Paul Cleland said that while OJD has been found it does not necessarily mean that these animals were a source of infection to sheep.

Dr Cleland said it was too early to say what the implications of these initial findings are to the OJD control program in sheep on Kangaroo Island.

The research, funded by the South Australian Sheep Advisory Group, aims to establish whether macropods such as kangaroos and wallabies have the potential to spread OJD.

As part of the study, tissue samples from macropods grazing on pastures contaminated by sheep are being tested to see if OJD bacteria are present. Eight OJD infected sheep farms have participated in the study, and laboratory results from approximately 240 macropods are currently available.

One of the two kangaroos which tested positive for the presence of OJD bacteria also showed microscopic changes in the tissues of the gut, consistent with the disease. Similar microscopic changes were present in a wallaby but bacterial culture results are not yet available. None of the remaining three tissue test positive macropods found so far showed suggestive microscopic changes.

"The study shows that OJD bacteria can be recovered from kangaroo and tammar wallaby tissues under natural field conditions. It confirms the result from pilot work conducted by Doctors Deb Lehmann and Greg Johnsson in June 1999, when bacteria were recovered from one of 34 tammar wallabies sampled at that time," Dr Cleland said.

However, there is currently insufficient information to determine how long OJD bacteria persist in the intestines of macropods, how commonly they are found, or if the bacteria are excreted by kangaroos or wallabies whose tissues test positive.

"We are waiting for the results of tests to determine if OJD bacteria can be recovered from the faeces of macropods, and if so, the number of bacteria that are present," Dr Cleland said.

"This is a crucial factor in determining whether or not these animals are capable of infecting sheep or other wallabies and kangaroos."

When the laboratory results become available, the research team, which includes Adelaide University Research Scholar and macropod expert Margie Wright, will be in a better position to make firmer conclusions from the study and determine what further work may be required.

The research being carried out on Kangaroo Island is in its early stages, but further results from the work will be released to the farming community as they become available.

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