

# Animal Health Update

South East Local Land Services

April 2020

## BEING COVID-19 READY ON YOUR FARM

Alex Stephens District Veterinarian Yass.

We have been instructed to stay at home unless we have a valid reason to travel. **Checking on the feed and water supplies of your livestock and ensuring the health and welfare of animals in your care is considered a valid reason to travel as you are legally obliged to ensure the welfare of your livestock.** If you have any Covid-19 symptoms however, you will be expected to self-isolate for at least 14 days. This means you will need to **develop a back-up plan**, someone who can check on, and or feed, treat and fix problems should they arise on the farm. This might be a neighbor, staff or relative, but preferably someone who lives close, and perhaps you could do the same for them. If you are an **absentee landowner** developing a back-up plan may be particularly important with current movement restrictions. If you live on a farm you have the luxury of more space but remember if you are in self-isolation you must not come into contact with your farm workers, or neighbors.

Farming is an essential service, and in many ways all the farm jobs must continue to be done, but **they must be done while making the safety of your team, family and contractors the priority.** Don't think that you are immune to the physical distancing requirements just because you live on a farm. In many ways farmers may find it more difficult as they have to break lifelong habits of a solid hand shake, and consider themselves immune to germs because they use the same pocket knife to cut up an apple as they use to bang tails.

### Things you can do on your farm:

- **do not shake hands**- think of a comfortable alternative
- hold meetings with your team **outside and stand 2 metres apart**
- **do not share vehicles**- each worker in their own vehicle
- stand 2 meters apart when chatting with neighbours and friends
- when handing things over put it down then back away and allow them to pick it up.
- equip vehicles with hand wash and water, and **wash hands frequently**
- have soap pump packs at the taps near work areas or sheds
- if shearing, crutching, drenching or fencing etc, **space staff out** so that they have a 2 metre safe work zone around them
- if you feel sick stay at home
- check on our neighbours and family over 70 years by phone and ask if we can do anything for them such as shopping or picking up supplies from town.

It is more important than ever to maintain our social contact with neighbours, friends and family we just need to do it safely by talking on the phone where possible and maintaining our distance.

Please remember that anytime a horse is being moved into or within NSW, it is a legal requirement to have two documents:

- 1) a Transported Stock Statement (TSS) filled out by the owner and the transporter
- 2) a Property Identification Code.



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There are however many exemptions, such as going to an event or a vet, where the horse movement will be documented by other channels.

For a list of these exemptions, how to apply for a PIC or a TSS and other frequently asked questions please see [here](#). (Please note that organised trail rides and lessons or covered by the 'similar function' in other events).

Police monitoring road movements can request these documents and penalties can apply for not following the requirements. The best advice is if you are unsure, don't travel, and if you do, use a TSS.

## LOCAL DISEASE WATCH

### Alex Stephens District Veterinarian Yass.

It is with great sadness that we have said farewell to Fiona Kelk from our South East District Vet and local Yass teams this month. Fi has been lured back to work in Canberra. She has been a huge asset to the local Yass and Boorowa districts and will be greatly missed by all (Alex will now be covering the Yass and Boorowa districts working Monday as well as Wednesday- Friday). Below is an article by Fi on the hazards of stock grazing panic species grasses, an extremely topical article for this month.

The most notable disease finding this month have been the detection of bovine ephemeral fever or 3 days sickness on 4 cattle herds in the South East region, including cases seen in the Illawarra and Yass LGAs. This is a mosquito borne virus, not usually seen in the south of NSW, but which is being seen across the state due to the current warm and moist seasonal conditions. For more information on the disease see the [DPI Primefact](#).

Summer rains have been very welcome, but with it came the germination of weeds. Many of these weeds and grasses can be toxic. Usually this only occurs if stock are forced to eat them as there is no alternative or they make up too great a proportion of the pasture, they are hungry, or they are immature stock and don't know better. Now is the time to learn your weeds and circumstances when they may be toxic and how to control them. For more information download the NSW weedwise app, talk to your Local Land Services Agriculture Advisor or Veterinarian or see the [NSW DPI Weeds website](#).

Many of our quality farm plants can also create intestinal problems in excess. Remember to give your young stock a 5 in 1 pulpy kidney booster before offering them a dramatic pasture change and never put them into a new paddock hungry. Clover and lucerne can create bloat, see the [primefact for treatment and prevention advice](#). Lucerne can also create a disease called 'red gut' in sheep which is best prevented by feeding more fibre or moving sheep off and on to limit grazing. See a case example [here](#). Brassicas are an excellent fodder but can create a long list of problems including photosensitisation. Minimise problems by following the timeframe guidelines, and roughage recommendations for grazing. For more information go [here](#).

Warmer than average days and overnight temperatures are driving rapid and lush autumn pasture growth. Warm and moist conditions are also perfect for worm eggs to hatch into infective larvae.

Prior to the autumn break our pasture heights were very low, and even with this rapid autumn growth, livestock have been grazing in the worm zone, which means they have been picking up any larvae available. The worm zone is from the base of the plant up to around 10cm - 15cm.

Livestock managers of sheep- doing worm tests now will give you a lot of information, allowing you to maximise productivity and create clean pastures for spring. During these warm and wet conditions, test every 4-6 weeks, especially if you are concerned about barber's pole worm. Worm Egg Count results from mid-February showed very low worm egg numbers on most properties, particularly for sheep that had been confined in drought lots and fed from raised feeders, or moved onto clean pasture after their last drench. Worm counts in March have been variable with some remaining low and others heading into the thousands due to both barbers pole and scour worm numbers increasing. Nematodirus (thin-necked intestinal worm) was present in moderate numbers in lambs,

as it has a very tough egg which can survive the dry conditions and hatch with the rains. This worm type can cause significant scours in lambs.

All cattle should be drenched in autumn for liver fluke. It is usually recommended to wait with this drench until the first frosts, allowing for a “cleanout” of fluke just before the cold weather causes the snail to hibernate. For ostertagia, calves should be drenched at weaning and all young cattle drenched during autumn. Remember cattle owners often tend to under drench young stock and over drench cows.

The water crisis experienced through summer also exposed more animals to infectious fluke cysts by grazing close to edges of springs and dams. One property was tested in early March and fluke eggs were detected in four out of five samples, and fluke ELISA blood tests showed high level of infection across the herd. Remember monitoring for fluke can be done in many ways, through requesting a test on faeces, blood tests or by seeking feedback on abattoir surveillance.

## HAIRY PANIC

### Fiona Kelk, District veterinarian Yass

Hairy panic (*Panicum effusum*) is a summer perennial grass that is generally short lived and rapidly becomes established after periods of summer rainfall, allowing for larger quantities to be grazed (Fig 1 and 2). This establishment is associated with an increase in plant poisonings, especially in younger sheep (Fig 3). While Hairy panic does have moderate grazing value (12-20% crude protein when young and lush) it should NOT be grazed by younger sheep, especially lambs, which are highly susceptible to poisoning. When hairy panic is a dominant plant in the pasture making up a large part of the bulk of available feed (>50%) it should not be grazed by any class of sheep. Hairy panic can be sprayed with herbicide and grazed after it has browned off completely.



Figure 1: Hairy panic (*Panicum effusum*)



Figure 2: Hairy panic (*Panicum effusum*)

Hairy panic toxicity presents as photosensitisation. The first signs in sheep are seen on areas exposed to direct sunlight. These areas include the ears (droopy ears occur), lips, eyelids, vulva and generally around the muzzle and nose. These areas lose skin and are reddened or blackened with crusty scabs. The eyes can become very swollen and weepy with a yellow fluid. The eyes and gums can become yellowed (jaundiced) due to the liver damage. When the head is severely affected it is commonly referred to as 'big head' or 'yellow big head' because of the weeping and jaundice. Sheep that recover may lose one or both ears or possibly have permanent eye damage. Recently shorn sheep can also be affected around the body.

Affected animals will become agitated and restless, shake their heads, seek shade and not want to eat.



Figure 3: Example of photosensitization around the eyes and muzzle of sheep

In all cases of photosensitisation the animal must be protected from direct sunlight and removed from the affected paddocks. There must be a good supply of fresh water and cereal hay or lower quality pasture hay provided. Avoid higher protein or green feeds as the animals have difficulty metabolising these due to liver damage.

## **ESSENTIALS FOR BACKYARD LAYER CHICKEN HEALTH AND WELFARE**

### **Lou Baskind – District Vet Palerang (Braidwood)**

The COVID19 pandemic has seen a rapid increase in the number of people buying laying hens for backyard egg production (in addition to toilet paper and pantry stores).

For some, this will be the first time they have owned backyard laying chickens. While no-one would have predicted or chosen the reasons for this sudden increase, I still say welcome to the family! You will most likely find it to be a highly rewarding experience.

I do have some worries, however, that where people have rushed into this decision they may not be fully prepared with the knowledge, equipment or infrastructure to afford these beautiful creatures the healthy lifestyle and high welfare standards they deserve.

Most often when chickens get sick, to the human observer no symptoms will be seen until the illness is so severe that the chicken is near death. It is the great frustration of chicken owners and vets alike, that attempts to save a sick chicken are usually futile, and very expensive. So, what can we do if we can't easily detect and treat illness? Well, as they say, "prevention is better than cure".

I have prepared this guide to small-flock chook preventative health and will also be preparing a series of short videos on key topics. I hope this will help to avoid unnecessary suffering, as well as help supply your family with healthy, safe and nutritious eggs straight from your own backyard.

The single most important thing you can do for the health and wellbeing of your backyard flock is to feed the correct diet. Their ancestor the Red Junglefowl is an opportunistic omnivore, scratching around in the jungle to find a wide variety of seeds, tubers, fruits, insects, snails and reptiles to eat. With your backyard around only 5% the size of their normal home range, free ranging will not provide enough. A mash, pellet or other poultry mix must be their mainstay. Kitchen scraps are a joy to feed out, watching the chickens express their natural behaviours by scratching and investigating, but again they are not the main diet.

To maintain full vigour, produce eggs and live a long life, chickens need the right balance of clean fresh water, energy, protein and micronutrients. Protein is essential for things like growth, egg production, feather moulting, the immune system and hormones. Most important among the micronutrients is calcium for strong bones and eggshells.

Commercial layer feeds are designed for very controlled large-scale systems and may not be right for your backyard chooks. Picking up the first bag that reads "layer" on the front is an error. You must read the label and check the protein percentage. When pullets are pre-lay (about 16 – 18 weeks old depending on the breed), they should be fed 14% total protein. Once they start laying, you need to kick that up to about 16% protein. If you don't want to buy commercial feeds, make sure you are well-educated in formulating a proper diet at home. There are good online sites and courses. One example is 'Make your own Chicken Feed' by Wynlen House Urban Micro Farm.

Calcium makes up 94% of the structure of an eggshell. If sufficiency calcium is not provided in the diet, chickens will mobilise their own bones. As you can imagine, this cannot continue for very long and does not end well. Internally, they spend 15 hours constructing the shell for one egg – so they need calcium continuously available in their blood stream, especially overnight. Larger pieces of pelletise limestone, oyster-shell grit or crushed eggshells can be slowly ground down in their gizzard, eking out calcium into the bloodstream throughout the day and night. So, feed a mix of calcium sources, some fine powder and some larger pieces.

Chickens need a coop where they can safely rest at night. The coop must be fully secure from predators like foxes. There must be enough perch space so that all the chickens can access a spot regardless of their rank in the pecking order. The perch should allow them to sit in a stable position, spreading the weight of their feet and

keel against the surface, and grasping the edges with their toes. Perches can have either a rectangular or slightly curved (oval) profile but should not be round. The required width will vary depending on the size of the breed, but for a standard hybrid layer you're looking at around 60mm.

The droppings of the chickens harbour a variety of bacteria, viruses, parasites and other potentially nasty organisms, as well as produce toxic ammonia as they break down. Chickens immune systems can cope with small loads, but if droppings build up, they will succumb to illness. Look into methods of managing the droppings such as deep litter systems, chicken tractors, raised housing or "poop boards". Keep feeders, waterers, perches and nest boxes clean of manure. You don't need to go overboard: physical cleaning, basic soap, vinegar, sunlight, heat, drying, and resting are all simple and effective methods of sanitising.

Putting in some basic biosecurity measures to protect the flock from incoming disease. Wild birds should not be allowed to commingle with your chickens. This may be unavoidable while they are free ranging but have their feeders and waterers inside pens that wild birds cannot access. Bird netting, plastic strips over doorways, plastic owls and hawks, and hanging old CD disks can all help to deter wild birds.

Your biosecurity should also include a quarantine for any new birds brought in. House them in a separate pen, a good distance (and preferably a solid barrier like a shed wall) separating them from the main flock. Wait three weeks to ensure no signs of illness before putting them in with the others.

If one of your chickens does happen to show signs of illness, they should be removed from the main flock at once and until they are fully recovered, to reduce the chance of spread. Again, use a quarantine pen or 'hospital cage' that is separated by a good distance and preferable by a solid structure from the main flock.

Chickens must be allowed to express their natural behaviours. One of these is dust bathing, which has the added benefit of helping to control external parasites like lice and mites. Clean sand will do the job, but you can also choose to use additives like diatomaceous earth (DE) or sulphur. Before using these products, find out more about them to be sure they are safe for you.

If you do use chemical preventatives for internal and external parasites, please follow the directions closely. Medications have withholding periods listed on the label. This is the time for which you must discard all the eggs after giving a medication. This is because traces of the medication will remain in the egg and could be dangerous if eaten. Please, this does not mean feeding the eggs to other animals or back to the poultry. The eggs must be binned!

There are some diseases which poultry can catch or harbour which are also infectious to humans. A couple of examples are salmonella enteritidis (which causes "gastro") and Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (which you probably know as Bird Flu or H5N1).

The NSW Food Authority offers some clear advice on how to protect yourself from food-borne illness when eating eggs which you can [find here](#).

Bird Flu is not present in Australia, but we actively watch for it due to the potential to cause serious illness in people. Should you observe sudden death, unusual postures, respiratory distress or reluctant to move eat or drink in a number of chickens you must notify us via either the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline (1800 675 888) or by contacting your local district vet. We will do a risk assessment and possibly a disease investigation. Let me reassure you that we avoid blanket destruction of backyard poultry and will only issue directions to euthanize if the public health risk is very high. In most cases the investigation rules out notifiable diseases and you get to "pick the brain" of your district vet to improve the overall health of your flock.

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