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# Livestock exports: animal health implications

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## ABSTRACT

The role of the Animal Health Division of the New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in the export of animals is outlined.

New Zealand's freedom from serious animal diseases and the high quality of its livestock are the major factors contributing to the steady overseas demand for animals. The animal health conditions of importation are variable and often require considerable negotiation before they are acceptable to both New Zealand and the importing country. Veterinary officers have a dual role — to protect the importer and to assist the exporter and there has to be constant liaison and co-operation at all levels to ensure a successful fulfilment of export orders.

Animal welfare is a major consideration at all stages of the operation.

**Keywords** Animal Health Division; certification; export; welfare

A farmer sending a sheep dog to Australia, a ferret breeder sending 13 fitch to Scotland and commercial operators sending 10000 cattle to Indonesia or 30000 sheep to Mexico are all involved in the same activity — the export of live animals. There is a popular misconception that live animal export is an easy, lucrative occupation which only involves purchasing the animals, putting them on an aircraft and then collecting the money plus an export incentive handout. Unfortunately this is not the case. The successful livestock exporter has to co-ordinate the involvement of many differing and specialised organisations. If he does not, he risks the contract not being fulfilled and the irate importer choosing another country for his future requirements.

### Organisations Involved

All importing begins with the importer and he stipulates the conditions of purchase. These conditions of purchase. These conditions must include the animal health requirements as defined by the veterinary authority of the importing country. In defining these conditions the authority should be guided by the recommendation in the International Zoo-Sanitary Code which states that any restrictions should be limited to conditions which are justified by health reasons and which are necessary to avoid or reduce the risks of transferring disease.

The Animal Health Division (AHD) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries is the recognised authority in New Zealand to which importing countries look to for ratification of their health requirements. Over the years good relationships have been established with practically all importing countries. Apart from the export health certification of dogs and cats to

Australia, which may be carried out by an approved veterinary practitioner, all certification is carried out by AHD veterinary officers. However veterinary practitioners are called upon to carry out specific therapeutic and prophylactic treatments not normally done by AHD veterinary officers.

The exporter obviously has a vital role in fulfilling the contractual agreements with the importer and he is responsible for obtaining the health conditions of importation. The AHD asks for the signing of contracts to be delayed until the Division and the chief veterinary officer of the importing country have agreed on the animal health export certification. The precaution may prevent severe embarrassment or even financial loss, as it is not unusual for import conditions to contain sections we are unable to comply with.

The Department of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provide valuable assistance in our international dealings as they often have access to the required authorities in the importing country. It is advantageous for a trading nation to have the minimum of export restrictions and the export of animals is controlled by the Department of Customs through the Customs Export Prohibition Regulations 1953. The export of sheep and cattle is not permitted unless the animals have been seen by an inspector of the appropriate breed society and certified as suitable for export. Whether this is considered a form of revenue or of quality control depends on whether you sign or receive the cheque.

### AHD Policy and Procedures

AHD has a policy of facilitating exports but this is not synonymous with bending the truth and it does

not mean that the Division exists only for this purpose. It must ensure that exported animals meet required health standards and that the welfare of the animals is safeguard during all the pre-export procedures and during shipment. Importing countries' veterinary services expect AHD to be impartial and the Division considers itself to be acting on their behalf in animal health matters. Not all exporters have always appreciated AHD's integrity and ethical approach but the majority are aware of its importance and are as concerned as we are to guard New Zealand's reputation for supplying high quality livestock.

New Zealand does have certain advantages when offering animals for sale. The quality of our livestock is recognised world wide. We have remained free from major epizootic diseases such as foot and mouth disease, rinderpest and sheep pox and we also have a good knowledge of the disease situation within the country. This information is obtained from our various disease surveillance systems. These include surveys for the prevalence of certain diseases; eradication and surveillance programmes for bovine brucellosis and tuberculosis and canine hydatidosis; daily disease investigations at the 5 Animal Health Laboratories and the ongoing disease surveys carried out by the Meat Division on animals slaughtered at meat processing establishments. This information proves invaluable when the AHD is negotiating changes in export certification.

The health conditions supplied by the importing country have to be converted into an Export Veterinary Health Certificate which is acceptable to the importing authority and our own veterinary officers. Unfortunately no 2 countries appear to require the same conditions. Sometimes the conditions are acceptable as received. Sometimes they are impractical and sometimes just impossible. Most countries try to be realistic and keep the health conditions to a minimum. Even so requirements vary from country to country because each country's animal health status is different from that which prevails in other countries. Countries which are free from blue tongue disease look favourably on our freedom from the disease while countries which believe they are free from infectious bovine rhinotracheitis and hairy-shaker disease will naturally show concern over the endemic nature of these diseases in New Zealand. If the conditions of importation are acceptable an export certificate is produced for the use of the veterinary officers in the field and a copy is sent to the veterinary authority of the importing country for its information.

When conditions cannot be met or they are not clearly understood we have to negotiate with the importing country's veterinary authority to find other mutually acceptable conditions. The problem may be simple and only require their acceptance of an alternative which still affords them the same

protection. It could be the substitution of a different type of test or certification that a disease does not occur in New Zealand. The problem may be far from simple in which case it can lead to long and protracted discussions before a final agreement is reached.

When the health certificate has been approved the main activities move into the field. At this stage it is essential for the exporting agents to liaise with the veterinary field staff. A battery of time-related tests usually has to be carried out within a limited period — often 30 days but sometimes even less. An efficient programme will not eventuate without close co-operation in the field. Agents sometimes forget that the export of animals is not our primary function. Other essential activities may mean that field staff are not immediately available. This also applies to laboratory staff who must be forewarned so they have time to prepare for unusual or large numbers of tests.

### **Difficulties in Certification**

Everything can be straightforward but difficulties are often encountered. An all too common request is for animals to come from areas which have been free from specified diseases for a specified time. This presents no problems if we know that the disease does not occur here. However most such requests relate to diseases which are endemic, often widespread and not notifiable.

Infectious bovine rhinotracheitis and bovine virus diarrhoea are often singled out in this way and they present insurmountable problems. Both diseases commonly occur wherever cattle are kept, and are often of such a mild and transient nature that they pass unnoticed. Even if outbreaks had to be reported most would still go unrecorded. It is mainly for these reasons that we cannot certify specific areas free from these diseases.

It is surprising how often we are presented with conditions which are so ill-defined they can be interpreted in several ways. Often an import protocol will contain a simple statement like 'the sheep are to be tested with negative results for brucellosis'. There is no indication which species of brucella is involved, there is no indication which of the many types of tests is to be used and there is no indication of what constitutes a negative result. Clarification must be obtained before certification can be completed.

Occasionally negotiations can be prolonged and even become deadlocked. One private-sector importation of bovine semen required the semen to be tested and proved to be free from all known and unknown pathogenic and non-pathogenic organisms. No change of attitude could be obtained so the condition remained unacceptable as we believed only a sterile product could meet this condition. It is ironic that semen, provided through an aid programme,

was accepted by the same country without meeting this condition.

On rare occasions an impression is gained that health considerations are not the only factors influencing an importation. The conditions for importing a particular consignment of rabbits were so onerous and difficult to follow that a stalemate resulted. Then apparently when it suited the importing country, the rabbits were accepted with the minimum of requirements; a simple general certificate of health.

Such problems are exceptional and invariably compromises are made on technical and veterinary matters especially when dealing on a veterinarian to veterinarian basis.

### **Serology Testing Problems**

Over recent years the definition of 'disease' has become a problem. There has, for instance, been a greater tendency to rely on serological tests as a means of defining the disease status of animals. The misconceptions that can follow the misunderstandings of the significance of the test are legion and unfortunately it is becoming more common to consider a serological response as evidence of infection and a lack of response as non-infection.

The situation will remain confused as long as a test which indicates a pre exposure to an antigen is used to indicate the possibility that an animal is infected with, or capable of transmitting, a disease. The very

nature of many serological tests, with difficulties of interpretation, with the effects of cross reactivity, the high probability of slight modifications of testing procedures affecting results and the general lack of international standards, ensures that these problems will continue to plague us. In addition, importing countries sometimes carry out serological tests months later using different testing techniques. The conflicting results which then occur continue to sow seeds of doubt.

### **Animal Welfare**

The welfare of the animals has at all times been the responsibility of the veterinary officer. With greater public awareness and changing attitudes which cause yesterday's normal farming practice to become tomorrow's act of cruelty, the welfare aspect is of great significance. The welfare of the animals has to continue to take precedence at all stages of operations. Although we have no control over animal transport after it leaves New Zealand, we do ensure that conditions are suitable for the animals' wellbeing and that enough food and water is carried for sea voyages. At the final loading of large shipments of animals our staff are present to see that the animals are healthy and fit for the journey, that there are no acts of cruelty during loading and that there is no overcrowding of the animals on the ship or aircraft.