

Sheep EID Myths & Madness

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Over the past few weeks we have watched myths and madness prevail in much of the discussion around Victoria's decision to go mandatory with an electronic ID system.

I am all for open conversation on the topic, but what becomes frustrating is the inaccuracies conveyed by those having the most to say. So let's have open conversation, but let's make sure it is accurate and well informed, and not simply hearsay or even worse, scaremongering.

We are still awaiting announcements around official business rules for the introduction of the system, but expect them sometime in the coming weeks given that the consultation period is now over. So in the meantime, as an independent member of the sheep industry with experience in the technology, the following are a few points of clarification relating to the proposed introduction of EID in Victoria.

MYTH - "Farmers won't be able to deal with the technology, and will need to buy too much equipment"

They don't need to. The only change for a Victorian farmer will be that they need to apply a different tag at lamb marking. Unless they want to use the technology for themselves on-farm, there will be absolutely no requirement to do anything different other than apply the EID tag.

MYTH - "inherent risks in the proposed system and the potential damage to national traceability and market access are too serious to be ignored".

Current System - Nationally the traceability system requires sheep to carry a tag printed with a PIC number. Sheep coming into Victoria are required to carry this tag. Sheep going out of Victoria are required to carry this tag.

New EID System - will require sheep coming into Victoria to carry a tag with a PIC number printed on it, and sheep within Victoria and those leaving Victoria will require an Electronic Tag which also has a PIC number printed on it. The difference between Victoria and other states will simply be that automated electronic recording systems will also capture electronic information in Victorian saleyards, abattoirs and property to property sales.

This is in no way damaging the existing systems, it is enhancing them.

MYTH - "Victoria should have waited for a national approach"

This would absolutely have been the best outcome. I don't think you would find a single person that would disagree with this. But we don't live in Disneyland, and sometimes the fairy tale outcome is simply that, a fairy tale. I genuinely believe that if the industry waited for a national approach, it wouldn't happen in my lifetime (and I intend to live for a while yet!) unless there was a serious disease or market access issue which drove an instantaneous response. Should an entire industry travel at the pace of the slowest participant?

MYTH - "We don't need it"

Are you kidding? I am interested to know how many of the people making this claim genuinely understand the need for a robust traceability system. If as an industry we want to continue to enjoy the high prices we have experienced over the last few years, then we need to do all we can to protect our status, and promote the reliability of our systems. Not wait for the proverbial to hit the fan at some stage, and then decide our current systems aren't robust enough to provide the rapid response desired.

MYTH - "Mob based is fine"

Did you know that just 7 sheep infected with foot and mouth disease made it into a saleyards in the UK which resulted in the destruction of over 6 million animals throughout the outbreak. Just 7!

MYTH - "It is just another cost"

In my opinion it isn't a cost, it is an expense. Are they different? Perhaps.

If you look at it as just handing out money then it is a cost. If you think of it as an expense of doing business then it is an expense the same as fertiliser, or drench, or insurance. An expense of maintaining market access, regaining market access quickly following a chemical residue or disease issue. Remember that more than 50% of our lamb is now exported. Any negative impact upon that will have major repercussions for the industry.

MYTH - "Saleyards won't be able to handle the extra workload"

There is no doubt that there will be change required in the way things are currently done in saleyards. Equally there is no doubt that there will be some time spent working through the best methods of implementing systems within each saleyard. But none of this is insurmountable. Saleyard operators and stock agents already know how to get large numbers of sheep through their yards, and will be well placed to design processes to integrate the systems. It may take a little time, and some planning, but it is all possible.

MYTH - "There are huge productivity gains to be made on-farm"

Don't get me wrong here, I am a major advocate for the use of EID on-farm for some producers. But it isn't a silver bullet, and it isn't a golden goose. It is simply another tool for producers to use to refine their management, and apply additional selection pressure within their self replacing flocks. It is an exciting

technology, and there are benefits to be had, but they will be most likely small, cumulative gains like every other tool in your system. Not a free ticket to prosperity.

MYTH - "I need an auto-drafter to use EID on-farm"

You can start recording data without owning any equipment at all if you want. Order tags with a numbered sequence printed on them, and keep track of the sequence of tags going into each mob at marking. For example tags 254 - 562 went into twin born lambs from 3&4 yo ewes. At any time in the future you can use that information. Possibly years later. You can also achieve a significant amount with a \$1000 stick reader. Auto-drafters simply increase efficiency. You don't have to spend \$20,000 to use EID!

So what does all of this mean?

There will be some challenges as the new system is implemented, but that is no different to any other industry adopting new technologies. We can't afford to move at the pace of the slowest members of our industry. The introduction of EID technology to the supply chain opens up new opportunities for carcass feedback, objective measurement and value based payment systems. It has the potential to be the catalyst for significant positive change within the industry as a whole. All players in the industry have an opportunity to benefit. From producers, to stock agents, saleyard operators, processors, wholesalers, retailers and perhaps most importantly, consumers. After all we produce for consumers, and no-one else. The only way any member of the supply chain will benefit however will be through embracing the opportunities, not resisting them.