



8 May 2020

MPI reference: B20-0241

COVID-19: Request for exemption to border restrictions for essential workers – sheep sector

Purpose:

This briefing seeks your agreement to grant an exemption from COVID-19 temporary border restrictions to a group of essential workers in the primary industries, to allow sheep pregnancy scanning in support of feed management.

Minister(s)	Action required:	Deadline
Minister of Agriculture Minister for Economic Development	Agree to an exemption to COVID-19 temporary border restrictions to enable named essential workers in the primary industries to enter New Zealand	As soon as possible

Comments:

A decision on this matter is urgent as there is a critical need for these workers to be present in New Zealand from mid-May until late June to contribute to the sheep breeding industry and minimise animal welfare concerns, which are compounded by the drought.

Contact for telephone discussion (if required)

	Name	Position	Work	Mobile
Responsible Manager	Kate Littin	Manager, Animal Welfare	s 9(2)(a)	s 9(2)(a)
Principal Author	s 9(2)(a)	Principal Adviser	s 9(2)(a)	

Key messages

1. Individuals with specialist ultrasound scanning skills are urgently needed to fill a critical gap in New Zealand's domestic capacity to service the sheep industry during May - June 2020.
2. Ultrasound pregnancy scanning of ewes is a skilled occupation that requires at least a season of training to achieve basic competency. It cannot be readily taken up by untrained people. Although some New Zealanders have these specialist skills, additional capacity is required due to the size of the national flock and the relatively short period during which accurate diagnoses can be made.
3. This request is supported by the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) because the workers are critical for essential veterinary and rural contracting services that, for animal welfare purposes, cannot be deferred.
4. Due to the extended drought in some regions ewes are already considered at risk. Feed availability has also been exacerbated by the reduced meatworks killing capacity caused by COVID-19 physical distancing rules, and the resultant backlog of animals being held on farms.
5. Cabinet agreed to delegate the authority to make exemptions to immigration policy to the Minister for Economic Development and the relevant portfolio Minister. You are the relevant Minister for agricultural workers. We ask you to grant an exemption to COVID-19 temporary border restrictions to the named individuals to enter New Zealand.

Recommendations

6. The Ministry for Primary Industries and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment recommend that you:

- a) **Note** that officials have received requests to enable individuals with specialist skills to fill a critical gap in New Zealand's domestic capacity to service the sheep industry.

Noted

- b) **Note** that this request is supported by MPI and MBIE because the workers are critical for essential veterinary and rural contracting services that, for animal welfare purposes, cannot be deferred.

Noted

- c) **Note** that ewe pregnancies are routinely diagnosed by ultrasound scanning between days 60 and 90. This enables farmers to make decisions to cull dry ewes and to preferentially feed ewes carrying multiple lambs. This has animal welfare implications if not carried out, and is an important management tool for farmers coping with feed shortages caused by drought and who are carrying more stock than usual owing to a slaughter backlog caused by COVID-19 spacing restrictions.

Noted

- d) **Agree** that while some New Zealanders with these specialist skills are available, additional capacity is required due to the size of the national flock and the relatively short period during which accurate diagnoses can be made.

Agreed / Not Agreed

- e) **Note** that all costs associated with the named workers' international and domestic travel and COVID-19 quarantine measures are to be met by either the individuals themselves or their sponsoring employers.

Noted

- f) **Agree** to exempt the attached list of agricultural workers from the temporary COVID-19 border restrictions, so that they can apply for supported temporary visas as essential workers critical to the maintenance of the primary sector.

Agreed / Not Agreed



Karen Adair
Deputy Director-General
Agriculture and Investment Services
Ministry for Primary Industries

Hon Damien O'Connor
Minister of Agriculture

/ / 2020



Alan Vandermolen
Director Entity Performance and Investment
Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment

Hon Phil Twyford
Minister of Economic Development

/ / 2020

Background

Delegation of exemption decisions on inbound essential workers

7. On 19 March 2020 Cabinet agreed to border restrictions preventing entry to New Zealand [CAB-20-MIN-0122 refers].
8. Cabinet also agreed high level parameters for case-by-case exemptions to COVID-19 border restrictions, including essential workers identified by the group of Ministers with Power to Act [CAB-20-MIN-0122 refers].
9. On 9 April 2020 the Director-General of Health made an order under section 70(1)(f) of the Health Act 1956, requiring all air passenger arrivals to go into managed isolation and quarantine. The border settings were confirmed by Cabinet on Monday 20 April 2020 [CAB-20-MIN-0176 refers].
10. On 21 April 2020 Cabinet agreed to delegate decision making on exemptions to border restrictions for essential workers to the Minister for Economic Development and the relevant portfolio Minister, while requests for exemptions for classes of workers continue to be considered by the COVID-19 Ministerial Group ministers [CAB-20-MIN-00130 refers].

The request – sheep scanners

11. Ewe pregnancies are routinely diagnosed by ultrasound scanning in approximately two-thirds of the national flock. This enables ewes carrying multiple lambs to be identified and appropriately fed during late pregnancy and early lactation (ewes bearing twin lambs require 40-50% more nutrition than those carrying singletons).
12. Underfeeding in late pregnancy can increase the risk of ewe deaths from pregnancy toxæmia or sleepy sickness as fat reserves are sacrificed for lamb growth. It also affects lamb survival rates. Due to the extended drought in some regions ewes are already considered at risk. While fewer multiple pregnancies and more dry ewes are expected under drought conditions, farmers may opt to cull dry ewes to free up stock feed in preparation for the lambing season. One veterinary practice has estimated that the potential animal welfare implications from not scanning could amount to the deaths of 60,000 lambs over the 600,000 ewes they normally scan in their district.
13. Feed availability may also be exacerbated by the reduced killing capacity that was required to meet COVID-19 physical distancing rules and the resultant backlog of animals being held on farms.
14. Scanning is limited to between 60 and 90 days of pregnancy. Scanning has started in some regions while in other regions it is expected to start in June. Although the service is provided by local contractors and veterinary practices it relies on a modest number of overseas specialists who are a long established and important component of the workforce either as independent contractors or as part of veterinary practices. The list of workers needed for this season is attached as Appendix One.

Additional scanning capacity is critical for animal welfare reasons

15. New Zealand has significant domestic capacity to scan a large part of the national flock. However, the industry's reliance on international specialists (some with long-standing farmer clients) for additional capacity, along with the possibility of an increased need in light of the low feed availability this season, means that it is very unlikely to be able to fully absorb the additional workload this year without them.
16. Estimates provided by independent contractors and veterinary practices indicate that they anticipate these international operators will scan approximately 1.5 million ewes this season.
17. Ultrasound pregnancy scanning is a skilled occupation that cannot be readily taken up by untrained people in a short time period; a least a season of training is required to achieve basic competency. The information provided by industry indicates that national capability is unlikely to be able to expand sufficiently to meet this season's demand.
18. It is likely that local contractors can absorb some of the additional work by moving around the country and working longer hours, but in the absence of specialist international operators it is likely that some sheep will not be scanned, resulting in significant risks to animal welfare in late pregnancy and lactation.

Support for the exemption request

19. Officials have received industry requests to enable essential workers in the sheep industry to enter New Zealand to complement New Zealand workers in diagnosing pregnancies.
20. This request is supported by the Ministry for Primary Industries and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment because the workers are deemed to be critical in providing essential veterinary and rural contracting services that, for animal productivity and animal welfare purposes, cannot be deferred.

Conditions on arrival of workers

21. On arrival in New Zealand, the workers will undergo mandatory managed isolation or quarantine in an approved facility for a minimum of 14 days, and meet any other requirements that apply at the time.
22. All costs associated with the workers' international and domestic travel, accommodation, and support will be met either by employers or by the individuals themselves. In addition, the employers or the workers themselves will need to meet any other additional costs, including in the event that they are unable to leave New Zealand in the event of further restrictions to manage COVID-19.

Next steps

23. If the request is approved, in accordance with Immigration *H5: COVID-19 Support Restricted Temporary Entry Instructions*, the workers will be invited to apply for supported temporary visas as essential workers critical to the maintenance of the primary sector. They will then be subject to the usual processes required for visa application.

Appendix One: List of pregnancy scanning technicians seeking exemption

NAME	DoB	NATIONALITY	PASSPORT NUMBER
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s 9(2)(a)

Proactively Released