



ADVERSE EVENT – ERGOT POISONING For veterinarians and farmers

MPI is aware of an event in Southland and Southern Otago, in which several farms have been affected by ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*). Ergot is a naturally occurring fungus which can affect grains and grasses, and produces potent alkaloids which are poisonous to animals. The feeding of infected ryegrass to dairy cattle has resulted in animal illness and deaths on a few dairy farms in the affected areas.

In New Zealand, ergot outbreaks have occurred sporadically, affecting various grains and stock feeds. The most recent outbreak was in 2013, affecting barley crops in the Rangitīkei and Manawatu areas.

MPI is currently working with various stakeholder groups on this issue, including DairyNZ, the New Zealand Veterinary Association, the Veterinary Council of New Zealand, Deer Industry New Zealand, the Dairy Companies Association of New Zealand, Beef & Lamb New Zealand and Federated Farmers.

MPI wish to inform farmers that they should watch cattle being fed ryegrass bailage or silage, and call a veterinarian immediately if any signs of ergotism are noted. Signs of ergotism can include lameness, failure to rise, poor doing, and in severe cases cold and necrotic lower limbs. It is important to note that ergot can be toxic to any species and class of animal, so affected feed should be disposed of properly.

Farmers are also reminded that, under the Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines (ACVM) Act, this feed is not fit-for-purpose, and should not be fed to animals. Furthermore, responsibilities under the Animal Welfare Act and the Animal Products Act include preventing access to the feed, providing veterinary treatment, and not transporting affected animals.

Ryegrass infected with ergot can be identified by the presence of ergot bodies – long purple to black structures in the place where the seeds should be. These ergot bodies contain concentrated ergot alkaloids, which can be toxic to animals.



Figure 1: Ergot body in silage



Figure 2: Ergot body on ryegrass stalk

Farmers and veterinarians can report cases of ergotism to MPI at ACVM-AdverseEvents@mpi.govt.nz.

ACVM Alert Notification 17-001

MPI is currently gathering information about this outbreak to provide better guidance on handling cases of ergot to veterinarians and farmers, and to develop targeted communications for affected areas.

Food Safety

Ergot alkaloids are quickly metabolised once consumed, and evidence indicates that it does not transfer to meat or milk.

No cases of human adverse health effects attributable to ergot exposure have been reported in New Zealand.

MPI will continue to work with industry stakeholder groups to disseminate appropriate guidance.

Contact details

Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI)
Regulation and Assurance Branch
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