

Bovine TB recalled in Wairarapa

Gerald Ford | 13th August 2011

A veterinarian honoured this week for decades of fighting bovine tuberculosis remembers when Wairarapa cows appeared to be losing the battle.

Dr Paul Livingstone of the Animal Health Board was this week awarded the Queen's Service Order (QSO) for leading the science behind TB control for more than 30 years.

Since the 1990s, New Zealand's 1700 herds have reduced to just 81 now.

Dr Livingstone came to Wairarapa in the late 1970s and said that, ironically, TB rates became "worse and worse the longer I was here".



Recognised: Dr Paul Livingstone (left) receives his QSO from Governor-General Sir Anand Satyanand. Photo / Supplied

He also advised Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry vets and farmers on possum control, but said in the days before intensive solutions you couldn't really help people.

TB rates improved with the formation of the AHB - a government and farmer partnership. Now Wairarapa is down to three infected herds in the south, Dr Livingstone says.

AHB national chairman, Wairarapa east coast farmer John Dalziell, says Dr Livingstone's award is richly deserved.

"He was a very quiet, sincere person," Mr Dalziell said. "Very sharp, very intelligent and totally committed to the task.

"Some of the trial work they [Dr Livingstone and others] did was amazing."

Mr Dalziell said Wairarapa was once one of several areas known for high TB rates, behind the West Coast and the King Country.

Dr Livingstone is the AHB eradication and research manager for TB.

His "outstanding contribution", according to the nomination which was forwarded by many national and international colleagues, was the "scientific and managerial leadership" of New Zealand's TB-control programme.

Possums were known as the main carriers of bovine TB in the wild by 1973, when Dr Livingstone began his research work on the West Coast.

What wasn't known was how cows and deer picked up the disease from sick possums.

"Pus on the pasture" from weeping lesions underneath a possum's front legs was originally thought to be the cause, Dr Livingstone said.

But that didn't explain why sheep were not also getting infected.

Enlightenment came one frosty morning when Dr Livingstone was checking an area treated with cyanide. A possum carcass lay covered in frost, except for a great lick mark left by an inquisitive cow. Sure enough, nosy cows were sniffing and licking the the carcasses, which was bad news if the possum had been sick.

Dr Livingstone says to keep areas TB free, possum

populations must be "kept at very low levels".

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