Liver fluke is one of the more complex and often overlooked parasite challenges in livestock. In the right conditions, infections can build over time and impact animal performance before obvious signs appear. For producers in higher rainfall or irrigated areas, understanding fluke risk is critical.

Unlike many gastrointestinal worms, liver fluke has a more complex lifecycle that relies on specific environmental factors, making seasonal awareness and timing critical for effective management.

Knowing when to act can make a significant difference to livestock health and productivity.

Why liver fluke risk increases in autumn

Liver fluke requires an intermediate host, typically freshwater snails, to complete its lifecycle. These snails thrive in wet areas such as drainage lines, irrigated pastures and low-lying paddocks.

Periods of rainfall and mild temperatures support both snail populations and the development of infective fluke larvae. As livestock graze these areas, they ingest the larvae, which then migrate through the animal's liver as they mature.

By autumn, livestock may have been exposed to fluke over several months, particularly in higher rainfall regions or properties with persistent wet areas. This is often when the impact on animal health and performance becomes more apparent.

Which livestock are affected by liver fluke?

Liver fluke can affect a range of grazing livestock, most commonly sheep, cattle and goats. A large range of species are susceptible, although the

impact can vary depending on the level of infection and environmental conditions.

Sheep are generally more sensitive to fluke burdens and may show more obvious production impacts, while cattle can carry infections for longer periods, often with more subtle signs.

In regions where conditions favour fluke development, both sheep and cattle should be considered at risk, particularly when grazing wet or low-lying areas.

Recognising the signs of liver fluke

Liver fluke infections can affect livestock in both acute and chronic forms, with symptoms varying depending on the level of infestation. Producers may observe:

- reduced weight gain or poor growth
- loss of body condition
- anaemia (pale gums or eyelids)
- lethargy or reduced grazing activity
- in some cases, sudden losses in heavily affected animals

Because these signs can develop gradually, liver fluke may go unnoticed until production impacts become significant.

The impact on livestock performance

Liver fluke affects the liver, an organ critical to metabolism, nutrient processing and overall health. Damage caused by migrating fluke can reduce feed efficiency and compromise growth and productivity

In production systems, this can lead to lower weight gains, reduced fertility and overall declines in animal performance. In some cases, secondary complications may arise due to reduced immunity and general condition.

In some cases, liver fluke can lead to serious health issues and may be fatal if left untreated.
Heavy infections, particularly in sheep, can cause significant liver damage and blood loss, which may result in sudden deaths.

Monitoring and managing fluke risk

Effective liver fluke control relies on understanding both the environmental risk and the lifecycle of the parasite. Identifying high-risk areas on farm, such as wet paddocks or irrigation zones, can help guide management decisions.

Diagnostic tools, including faecal egg counts and liver fluke testing, can assist in determining the presence and severity of infection.
Where treatment is required, timing plays an important role. Treating too early or too late in the lifecycle can reduce effectiveness, so aligning treatments with seasonal risk is key.

Treatment options within a parasite management program

Effective liver fluke control requires a considered, multi-factored approach that considers seasonal conditions, pasture risk and the lifecycle of the parasite.

On properties where fluke is present, a management strategy may include monitoring livestock through testing, identifying high-risk paddocks, fencing off high risk wet areas and applying treatments at key times of the year. Strategic treatments can help reduce fluke burdens within livestock while also limiting pasture contamination and ongoing reinfection.

Because liver fluke develops through multiple stages within the animal, selecting a treatment that targets the stages present at the time of application is important. In autumn, livestock are often carrying a mix of early immature, immature and adult fluke, which can influence both product choice and timing.

Products such as HRC Abatech Ultra Pour-On are designed to target all three stages of liver fluke, including early immature, immature and adult fluke. This can be particularly valuable during higher-risk periods when multiple stages may be present at once.
Selecting the right treatment and applying it at the appropriate time can help reduce fluke burdens, support livestock performance and form part of a broader parasite management strategy.

If you have any concerns regarding your livestock and liver fluke, please consult your veterinarian.