

EQUINE INFLUENZA ONE YEAR ON

Lessons Learned from Australia's Equine Influenza Outbreak

We still have some way to go to have a complete and clear understanding of the events leading up to and during the Equine Influenza (EI) Outbreak in Australia. However it is great news that Australia is claiming “freedom” from EI as they have not had a new clinical case since late December '07. Now they have to prove they are free and this will take quite some effort, especially as they have vaccinated a large number of horses. At the time of writing the Callinan Commission of Inquiry has not reported its findings and issues around cost sharing and compensation have still to be resolved. Despite this it is important that we keep this issue in front of the “Equine Industry” of New Zealand and ensure that we learn from their experience.

This is a list of areas that we need to pay attention to and improve our preparedness for this disease.

1. Maintain very strict controls at our border.

Horses enter NZ from a variety of countries. For each exporting country there is an Import Health Standard (IHS) stating what tests and isolation procedures need to be applied before the imported horses are free to enter the general population. These IHSs are agreed between the importing and exporting countries and managed by the respective Government agencies. In the case of NZ this agency is the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry - Biosecurity New Zealand (MAFBNZ). Because (prior to August '07) both Australia and New Zealand were free of EI we shared similar IHSs and in the case of horses coming from England or America they could do their three weeks post arrival quarantine (PAQ) in either country and then travel freely to the other.

The time spent in quarantine (both pre export and post arrival) is determined by the diseases the horses from the exporting country may be carrying. In the case of a country that has EI there is the need for a three week pre export isolation (PEI) and two week PAQ. This is the time needed for any infected horses to be detected, show the disease or possibly transmit it to its travelling companions. If a horse is found with the disease, it and its travel mates can be kept in quarantine till they fully recover and are no longer a risk to our population. It appears that initially the disease went undetected in the Australian quarantine facilities and failure to adequately apply biosecurity measures allowed it to get out into the general population.

People and equipment also need to be managed at the border. While there is less risk of introduction of EI by these means than via direct horse imports, it is vital that we maintain our vigilance. In the past our distance and hence travel time from EI endemic countries has worked to our advantage but with Australia only three hours away by plane it was possible the disease could have been brought into NZ in this way. Horse people and others who had been in contact with (infected)

horses posed the greatest risk and we relied very heavily on them washing adequately, putting on clean clothes and then correctly filling in their arrival documentation so that they were checked at Border Biosecurity. Unfortunately, on this occasion, it took a little time for the people working at the border to be informed of the outbreak in Australia but they will all now be very aware of EI. There will always be the need for personal responsibility and it is not good when horse people pass themselves off as belonging to other trades to avoid scrutiny at the border.

2. Apply the latest technologies to disease testing

In 2003/04 New Zealand proposed changes to our IHS that we shared with Australia for the importation of horses from EI endemic countries. Our suggestion was to introduce a test that detects the genetic material (RNA) of the influenza virus in nasal or naso-pharyngeal swabs. The test is called a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) and has been used extensively in detecting infected horses in the Australian outbreak. However at the time the Australian Government Agency responsible dismissed the idea and must now seriously regret that decision.

We do have the capability to undertake this testing in NZ but it has been shown in the Australian outbreak that automation of the testing added to their ability to handle the large number of samples being generated in the peak of the incursion.

3. Horse locations

In the event of an outbreak of any equine disease in NZ it is vital we know the number, location and ownership of all horses and donkeys. A project is underway to collect this information and store it in the national database **Agribase** for use in an emergency.

Many horse owners will already be on the database because of other farming activity but it is important that the horses present on those properties are recorded. Others will have recently received a survey form for completion as various organisations associated with the NZ Equine Health Association (NZEHA) ask their constituents to participate.

If you don't think you have been included please contact the AsureQuality helpline on **0800 226 454** or visit their website: **www.asurequality.com** .

4. Well resourced Industry Representative group with good working relationship with MAFBNZ

In 1993 the Biosecurity Act was passed and one of the ambitions of the new Bill was to have a more formal involvement of "Industry" in deciding which exotic diseases were of importance to NZ and in the development of Pest Management Strategies (PMS) to deal with them. There was also an enthusiasm within Government for the cost of these exercises to be shared by industry.

The Equine Industry was already involved with MAFBNZ in managing Equine Viral Arteritis (EVA) that had been accidentally introduced prior to 1987 and very quickly established the NZEHA to represent our “industry”.

The management group meets two or three times a year and all of the representatives volunteer their time. There is limited funding from various industry sources and project work is undertaken by a Technical Adviser. The available funding was totally inadequate for the work required when EI occurred in Australia and we are grateful to the NZ Racing Board for meeting the exceptional costs and for funding various projects for the “Equine Industry” since. We need to review our funding and structure so we are better equipped when faced with a similar risk of a disease incursion or the real thing.

The NZEHA has been working with MAFBNZ for over 10 years on a PMS for Equine Influenza and it is a disappointment that it has not been achieved and seems unlikely to be so in the future. However our efforts over that time have not all been in vain and we were probably better prepared to have the disease than for Australia to get it and not us. There were well set out plans on how we would handle an incursion and these are being updated from what we have learnt from the Australian experience. The personnel on the NZEHA have been quite stable and as an industry we have quite a bit of experience of dealing with MAFBNZ. There has already been a meeting of interested parties to address issues learnt from our “mini emergency” and top of the list as you might expect is Communication.

In looking at the Australian experience there appeared to have been numerous restructurings and personnel changes within the Australian Quarantine and Investigation Service (AQIS) which is the equivalent of our MAFBNZ. This contributed to a lack of leadership and loss of responsibility for essential protocols. While there were some plans and procedures in place there was no checking that they were being properly applied across a whole range of situations. It is a timely lesson for our MAFBNZ.

5. Horse people need to understand the disease threat and be trained in biosecurity

All horse people should now be familiar with the symptoms of EI and know to call their vet or the **Biosecurity Hotline 0800 80 99 66** if they think their horses may have been the disease. Recently imported horses, or contacts with them are the most likely risk and these should be kept isolated for some time after their release from PAQ.

Should a tentative diagnosis of EI be made in NZ then there will be an immediate ban of horse movement until the degree of spread of the disease is established. Think about how you would cope if you had to leave your horses where they are at present for at least three weeks. Along with movement control it is important that all properties undertake biosecurity to avoid the spread of the disease. The NZ Racing Board sponsored a number of Biosecurity Training Sessions throughout the

country before Christmas and there are manuals available to help horse people with basic biosecurity techniques.

6. Good plans and preparedness

As I have already said, over the nearly 10 years we have been working towards a PMS for EI, a considerable amount of work had gone into Technical and Operational Plans to cope with an Equine Influenza incursion. Much of this work was undertaken by MAFBNZ staff at the Investigation and Diagnosis Centre (IDC) at Wallaceville, Wellington. These were quite detailed in many of the technical areas and have been updated since the Australian outbreak. Of huge assistance to these rewrites was the eventual involvement of a number of MAFBNZ staff in “real life” situations in both New South Wales and Queensland over the past six months.

One of the early observations from the Callinan Enquiry into the Australian outbreak was that, while there may be plans in place to both prevent an incursion of an equine disease such as EI and to deal with it if and when it arrives, it is vital that their application in the field is regularly audited. If the facilities are inadequate or the people applying the plans become lax then it is very easy for breakdowns to occur.

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