

Australian Racing Industry Should Prepare for Another Influenza Outbreak, Melbourne Vet Tells Conference

*The Australian horse racing industry is worth \$7.7 billion annually and employs over 240,000 people. Last year – on August 25 – the first cases of Equine Influenza (EI) were reported in NSW. By December, 50,000 horses had been affected in 7,000 premises and the entire NSW and Queensland racing calendars had been shut down, costing more than \$100 million in direct costs to the equine industries and billions more in indirect costs.**

Dr James Gilkerson, Past President of the Equine Veterinarians Association and virologist at the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Veterinary Science, argues that:

- *Recommendations made before the EI outbreak were not implemented and this delayed emergency access to a vaccine and delayed control of the outbreak by more than three weeks – the time in which the disease affected Randwick Racecourse, Warwick Farm and Rosehill, effectively shutting down the NSW racing season*
- *that the current push by the racing industry for widespread vaccinations will only delay detection of any future EI incursion, which would make eradication more prolonged and painful for the Australian horse industry as a whole.*

Dr Gilkerson will be speaking on EI on Wednesday at the AusBiotech Annual Conference in Melbourne (October 26-29).

When the first cases of EI were reported in Centennial Park in Sydney on August 25, the federal government initiated its AusVet Plan for Equine Influenza, a plan that had been written because of the high level of risk that this disease would eventually enter into Australia from the rest of the world, probably in an import of race horses.

The vaccine – widely available overseas where EI is endemic – was imported on 17 September and vaccinations started on 29 September, five weeks after the outbreak was first declared. According to Dr James Gilkerson, Past President of the Equine Veterinarians Association and virologist at the Faculty of Veterinary Science, getting the vaccine registered for emergency use in Australia took more than 3 weeks.

While the AusVet Plan had recommended that the vaccine be registered for importation because of the high likelihood of an outbreak, “it was never acted upon,” according to Dr Gilkerson. Surprisingly, the vaccine remains unregistered for importation should another EI outbreak arise, “which would lead to similar delays in getting the vaccine into the country,” Dr Gilkerson argues. “The vaccine should be registered for emergency use so that we can respond faster should another outbreak occur.”

Dr Gilkerson provided evidence to the Callinan Inquiry into the EI Outbreak, however he said that the inquiry concentrated on how the disease entered Australia rather than looking at the systems put in place to deal with the outbreak.

Last month, Racing NSW chief executive Peter V'Landys called for racehorses to be vaccinated against equine influenza annually. A random, voluntary vaccination of horses across Australia would be a disaster for the Equine Industry, according to Dr Gilkerson. He argues that vaccinating some horses, but not others, would lead to a subpopulation of immune horses that may develop the disease but do not show symptoms – in a similar way to some children immunized against chicken pox may get infected but develop a milder form of the disease.

In the same way that the disease entered Australia last year – in horses imported from Japan who, despite being immunized against EI developed the disease in quarantine – these infectious horses would not be detected until it was too late, and the disease was again in the general horse population.

An outbreak of EI occurred in Japan in 1971, followed by eradication of the disease and vaccination of horses. According to Dr Gilkerson, in 2007, another outbreak occurred but by the time it had been detected, infected horses had been transported across the country disseminating the disease. “Japan’s EI outbreak started before ours and they are still delaing with it now. By the time they realised they had EI in their vaccinated horses it was too widespread to control easily and they had exported it to us.”

The answer, according to Gilkerson, is to improve the quarantine system for all animal imports and to have a vaccine registered for emergency use to ensure that Australian horses have faster access to the vaccine should it be needed in the future.

Timeline:

17/8/2007: EI detected in Eastern Creek and Spotswood Quarantine Stations following an import of racehorses from Japan into Tullamarine.

22/8: sick horses detected at Centennial Park Equestrian Centre in Sydney

25/8: EI confirmed

28/8: movement bans initiated.

17/9: strategic vaccination program announced.

29/9: containment zones established and strategic vaccination begin

25/12: last reported cases

March, 2008: Qld and NSW declared free of EI

(*www.animalagriculture.org)

