Exotic Animal Diseases Bulletin

Importation of live birds and hatching eggs into Australia

Background

In 1956 Australia introduced an embargo on the importation of poultry, poultry products and caged birds to protect commercial producers and bird fanciers from a range of serious exotic avian diseases which existed in many parts of the world.

With the ban on introductions of poultry genetic stock, Australian industries fell behind the rest of the world in production of table birds, and also in other areas such as fancy birds, aviary birds and racing pigeons. This led to widespread smuggling, mainly by people out for a quick profit with little or no interest in taking precautions to avoid the introduction of diseased stock.

In response the Australian Government undertook the construction of an egg hatching facility at Torrens Island in South Australia and a live bird facility at its Spotswood quarantine station in Victoria. The embargo was amended to allow controlled imports through these facilities, commencing in 1990.

Since then two privately owned egg hatching facilities have been built in the eastern states and these operate under Quality Assurance arrangements with the Australian Quarantine & Inspection Service (AQIS).

These quarantine facilities are essentially two buildings, one inside the other. The inner shell provides a biologically secure environment for the conduct of the quarantine program while the outer area is a buffer zone designed to maintain quarantine integrity and protect plant and equipment from the elements.

Exterior of the Torrens Island facility. Photo: D Buckley

Each biologically secure area operates at a negative atmospheric pressure to prevent the escape of unfiltered air. Additional containment measures include shower in/out, filtration of air in and air out, solid waste either stored in large freezers until the end of the program (private facilities) or autoclaved (government facilities), treated drinking water, irradiated feed, waste water treated prior to disposal and only essential personnel permitted access during a program.

Import protocols

Importations may only be undertaken from countries with a reliable government veterinary service in place. A set of import protocols has been developed by Biosecurity Australia for each category, stipulating the conditions under which the importation may take place. Typically they include:

- official government declarations regarding the disease status of the country of origin;
- pre-export testing;
- flight details (avoiding endemic or risk country airports); and
- post-arrival testing in quarantine.

As with all commodities imported into Australia, much of the quarantine process is undertaken in the country of origin. In the case of fertile hatching eggs, the maternal flock is tested for a range of diseases both before and after egg collection and a declaration from the manager of the source flock is required to verify that the conditions of isolation have been observed. These declarations are all countersigned by a Government Veterinary Officer.

In addition, Australian-bred Specific Pathogen Free (SPF) eggs are required to be hatched and raised with the imported flock in the case of fertile eggs. Being completely susceptible these sentinel birds play an invaluable role in the disease surveillance process.

The import protocols are subject to review and have recently been strengthened for hatching eggs to include a test of the source flock for avian influenza, rather than a country of freedom declaration as has been the case in the past.

Torrens Island egg hatching facility

The Torrens Island facility was completed in 1990 at a cost of over $2m and is designed to allow commercial chicken, turkey and duck breeders access to overseas genetic material free from exotic diseases such as avian influenza, Newcastle disease, Salmonella species, Mycoplasma and avian paramyxovirus.

There have been 34 importations since it was opened, comprising 28 chicken, 3 turkey and 3 duck. Additional pre-release verification testing has been required on occasions, but exotic disease has never been diagnosed in the sixteen years that Torrens Island has been operating.

Spotswood live bird facility

The Spotswood facility was completed in 1990 and accepted its first shipment of live birds on 19 February 1990. This ended a 40-year embargo on the legal
importation of avian genetic material into Australia.

There have been 60 importations since it was opened, comprising racing and fancy pigeons, budgerigars, macaws, parakeets, kiwis, Amazon parrots, Caique parrots and one pet cockatoo. As well as the live birds there have been two shipments of 500 fertile eggs.

The future

AQIS no longer owns its animal quarantine stations. Title at Torrens Island was transferred to the State Government a number of years ago and Spotswood has been sold to a private investor on a lease back arrangement.

Stakeholders of Torrens Island have expressed strong interest in taking over the lease of the facility and running it under a QA arrangement similar to that used in the two existing private facilities. The recent spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza has restricted the number of countries from which fertile eggs and live birds can be imported. It has also limited the number of international airports available for refuelling stops or transhipment. This situation is not expected to improve in the short term.


Lost tombstone links two quarantine islands

The discovery ten years ago of a 1915 tombstone on Torrens Island (TI) in South Australia for Dr Joseph Leatham Wassell — intended for Thursday Island, centre of Australia’s quarantine defences for the Torres Strait — sparked a 4WD journey from the bottom of mainland Australia to the tip of Cape York, and by vessel to the Torres Strait, to return the stone to its rightful place.

Dr Joseph Wassell was a medical practitioner, military medical officer and quarantine officer on Thursday Island until his untimely death at the age of 42 in April 1915 as a result of stonefish envenomation.

A graduate of Sydney University, Dr Wassell worked for 15 years in the Torres Strait and was so highly regarded that a memorial was erected on Thursday Island in his honour. The memorial was shifted to the cemetery when the new Council Chambers were built in 1996, due to concerns about traffic safety. His grave is unlikely to be found due to a lack of records at that time.

A petition against the relocation of the memorial stones to another part of Torres Shire was lodged with the South Australian Museum, which had cultural and historical significance.

A council meeting on 19 July 2005 accepted the headstone on behalf of Torres Shire communities at a council meeting on 19 July 2005. Seven councillors, 15 council staff, and Anglican and Catholic bishops joined with AQIS staff to commemorate the stone's belated arrival.

In A.C.C. Lock's Destination barrier reef, published in 1959, Dr Wassell is described as ‘a splendid man who never failed anyone in time of sickness’. It is hoped that the journey of Dr Wassell's tombstone will remind people of the work of a dedicated servant of the people who committed his short professional life to the health and well being of the people of the Torres Strait.

Torres Shire Council (TSC), who confirmed his suspicions and agreed that the stone should be returned as it had cultural and historical significance for the people of the Torres Strait.

In July 2005 Ian drove from Adelaide to Seisia Community, near the tip of Cape York, and boarded a quarantine vessel bound for Thursday Island. Alan Ketchell, acting mayor of the Torres Shire Council and an elder from Thursday Island, accepted the headstone on behalf of Torres Shire communities at a council meeting on 19 July 2005.

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Torres Shire Council had been discussing relocating the memorial to a prominent position in the community, even before the tombstone was rediscovered.

Ian White, Quarantine manager at Torrens Island, with the headstone that he found and delivered to its proper destination, Thursday Island.

Garrison.

Dr Wassell may well have faded into history were it not for the discovery of his headstone on Torrens Island (also known as TIs), a quarantine facility in South Australia.

Ian White, Manager Torrens Island Quarantine Facility, found Dr Wassell's headstone amongst an array of island memorabilia in a crumbling boatshed in 1996. South Australian Museum staff were invited to visit and took much of the memorabilia, but the headstone was overlooked. Ian placed it in safe storage to protect it from being souvenired by the public.

He concluded that in 1915 the headstone was mistakenly delivered to Torrens Island (TI) in South Australia instead of Thursday Island (TI) in the Torres Strait. He rang the Torres Shire Council (TSC), who confirmed his suspicions and agreed that the stone should be returned as it had cultural and historical significance for the people of the Torres Strait.

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Neil Ramsay
AQIS public awareness officer