HORSE INDUSTRY CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

Out-of-session – African horse sickness (AHS) Teleconference

Minutes (and out-of-session paper)

16 September 2020
10.30am to 11.30am

Department of Agriculture, Water & the Environment
Teleconference/M.3.02
Canberra ACT 2601

Attendees
Department

Beth Cookson (Chair)	Animal Biosecurity
Robyn Martin	Biosecurity Animal Division
Jonathan Taylor	Animal Biosecurity
Allan Sheridan	Animal Biosecurity
David Johnson	Animal Biosecurity
Cherry Chung	Animal Biosecurity
Scott Turner	Animal and Biological Imports
Ainslie Brown	Animal and Biological Imports
Tanya Oliver	Animal and Biological Imports
Emma Ford	Animal and Biological Imports
Kym Russell	Animal and Biological Imports
Margaret White	PEQ Operations
Marley Matthews-Barnard	PEQ Operations

External Members

Patricia Ellis	Australian Horse Industry Council
James Gilkerson	Australian Veterinary Association
Kirsten Neil (on behalf of Andrew Hamilton)	Equestrian Australia
Cameron Croucher	Equine International Air Freight
Jeffrey Wilkinson	Equine Veterinarians Australia
Chris Burke	First Point Animal Services
Amy Little	International Racehorse Transport
Ross Kendell	Horse Industry Consultant
Josh Murphy	New Zealand Bloodstock
Andrew Small	Racing NSW
Grace Forbes	Racing Victoria

Meeting Minutes

The chair welcomed and thanked members for attending this out-of-session teleconference. A virtual roll call was completed to identify attendees on the teleconference line.

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (the department) held the teleconference to update Horse Industry Consultative Committee (HICC) members on the current status of the African horse sickness (AHS) outbreak and spread in South East Asia, communicate its AHS risk management measures and facilitate general discussion.

The department prepared a paper titled 'African horse sickness (AHS) – an emerging disease in South East Asia' that was circulated to HICC members on 11 September 2020. The chair discussed points from the paper, including AHS being the most serious OIE listed disease of equids concerning Australia and actions the department has undertaken in response to notifications of AHS in Thailand (March 2020) and Malaysia (September 2020) (refer to paper).

Further information was then provided by the department about what is known about the detection of AHS in Malaysia, including that there has been a number of reports from multiple sources as to the means of AHS movement from Thailand into Malaysia, but there has not yet been any official identification and it may not ever be officially identified.

Concern was raised regarding import consignments of horses transiting Singapore en route to Australia. At this stage the department has not put any additional measures in place for horses transiting Singapore over and above the current import permit conditions requiring insect nets over the air stalls and use of insect knock down spray. The department also noted that a quick transit without the hold being opened was a strong risk mitigation approach. It was also agreed that horses rapidly transiting Singapore in a closed airconditioned aircraft represented a lesser risk than opening the hold and loading horses resident in Singapore. While Singapore remains free from AHS and if Australia is confident in Singapore's surveillance for the disease, current insect control measures may be sufficient – this is being kept under review. There was some discussion around the mesh size of insect nets on this point, noting that the current requirements were not designed to help manage AHS risk and that known AHS vectors are very small. There was discussion around the use of insect repellent and the external parasite treatment that was already applied as part of the import conditions. Several different topical insect repellent formulations were discussed, noting that in South Africa where AHS is endemic, the product DEET is used albeit being associated with certain side effects.

In regard to the import of horses directly from Singapore there are currently no changes, but the department is closely monitoring a range of sources for more information in addition to seeking further surveillance details from Singapore. Specifically, Australia wants to ensure Singapore's surveillance meets OIE code recommendations for AHS neighbouring countries. At this stage, Singapore has advised it has been conducting extensive surveillance since March, including officer presence on the ground at horse stables but has not provided details of the results of its surveillance program.

The primary vector for AHS in endemic regions is *Culicoides imicola*, which is known to be present in Thailand but has not been recorded in the Malaysian peninsula. It is located throughout Africa and parts of the northern hemisphere, including Europe, but distribution throughout South East Asia isn't fully known. The department is working with entomologists to identify other potential vectors in South East Asia and Australia. Australia is known to have insect vectors that transmit viruses similar to AHS, such as Bluetongue. It is thought that

infected midges could be capable of blowing from Indonesia to Northern Australia and disperse up to 150kms on wind. It was noted that historical jumps of AHS from country to country to date has been generally through the movement of infected equids rather than via insect vectors.

Action Item 1: The department will look into whether AHS has been included as a target disease by the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy surveillance program.

Dr Grace Forbes commented that the wording used in the department's paper about the potential implications of AHS in Australia was not strong enough. The potential negative consequences would be debilitating even if only a single case was found, and the disease didn't become established. A single case would cause significant trade consequences and if AHS was to establish there would be even wider reaching implications. There was general agreement to these comments.

Andrew Small raised concern over Singapore's reliance on Malaysia for horse feed as they are continuing to trade after the AHS report in Malaysia. Singapore has advised the department it completed an in-depth risk assessment of this pathway and is fumigating imported feed.

In regard to potential transmission via vectors, there was general discussion about distances between each of the Malaysian, Thai and Singaporean borders from the reported AHS cases. It is understood to be approximately 500km between the Malaysian outbreak and the closest case in Thailand, but the department will follow up and confirm that information. Dr James Gilkerson pointed out that vector transmission seemed unlikely when no cases were reported along the hundreds of kilometres between the Thailand cases and the case in Malaysia. There was general agreement around the anomaly in findings and understanding.

Action Item 2: The department to follow up distances between the cases occurring in Thailand and those occurring in Malaysia and provide the information to HICC members.

The chair agreed and noted there has been a lot of speculation on the transmission pathway into Malaysia. However, the most important points to clarify from the information provided so far is that:

- the affected horses have been euthanised; and
- whether there is any evidence through ongoing surveillance that local transmission has occurred, indicating a competent vector is present in Malaysia capable of transmitting AHS.

The department is currently waiting on Singapore's surveillance results and further clarification of the Malaysian detections. A different approach to the risk management for imports from Singapore would be considered if it is confirmed that local transmission in Malaysia is possible due to the presence of competent vectors or Singapore's surveillance program is not as specified by the OIE. Singapore could not meet Australia's equine health requirements if surveillance detected the presence of AHS.

Dr James Gilkerson asked whether testing imported horses from Singapore would be the best way to proceed. The chair responded that the department is considering a range of potential options that could be applied as additional risk management depending on what we learn about the situation. What the department has learned to date doesn't seem to indicate evidence of vector transmission in Malaysia.

Dr Ainslie Brown confirmed that the Australian Centre for Disease preparedness (ACDP – formerly AAHL) can conduct testing (recommended by the OIE) for AHS. Their available

methods include virus isolation, PCR for antigens and a range of serology. Dr James Gilkerson advised the type of PCR test ACDP currently use may not be the latest, most effective test available for AHS and that this should be checked.

Action Item 3: The department will discuss the type of PCR that ACDP has available for AHS testing and will advise HICC members.

The chair suggested a follow-up teleconference with HICC members once more information is confirmed and HICC members agreed.

The chair thanked members for their time and engagement in the discussion. The meeting was closed, and the action items will be progressed.

Summary of action items:

Action Item 1: The department will look into whether AHS has been included as a target disease by the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy surveillance program.

Action Item 2: The department to follow up distances between the cases occurring in Thailand and those occurring in Malaysia and provide the information to HICC members.

Action Item 3: The department will discuss the type of PCR that ACDP has available for AHS testing and will advise HICC members.

Date: 10 September 2020
Prepared by: Animal Biosecurity Branch
Out-of-Session Paper

African horse sickness (AHS) – an emerging disease in South East Asia

INTRODUCTION

African horse sickness (AHS) is a serious OIE-listed exotic disease of equids that is spread by insects. Some strains of AHS have mortality rates as high as 95% in more susceptible equids such as horses. Australia's current import conditions for horses require that countries approved for direct import to Australia have been free from AHS for the last two years, that AHS is compulsorily notifiable in their territory and that the horse was not vaccinated in the 60 days prior to export.

On 27 March 2020, Thailand notified the OIE it had detected AHS. More recently, Malaysia notified the OIE on 2 September 2020 that it had detected AHS, with clinical signs first emerging early August 2020. This jump of AHS into South East Asia is a biosecurity concern for horse and equine semen imports. Thailand and Malaysia are not approved countries for the direct importation of horses or equine semen, so there is no direct biosecurity risk from these incursions. However, further spread of this vector-borne disease to neighbouring approved countries could provide an entry pathway for this disease into Australia since most major jumps in its distribution are associated directly with the movement of live equids.

AHS EMERGENCE IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

AHS is endemic in Sub-Saharan Africa. Outbreaks have occurred in the Middle East, Mediterranean and India but were eventually eradicated.

Thailand notified detection of AHS on 27 March 2020. The source of this outbreak has not been confirmed but is thought to be due to the importation of zebras. The outbreak has been confirmed as serotype 1.

This outbreak spread to several provinces in Thailand and is ongoing. It has been declared resolved in 15 provinces. Control measures put in place include movement controls, surveillance programs, zoning, quarantine, vector controls, vector surveillance and a ring vaccination program. There has been no advice from Thailand about the likely vectors involved in this outbreak.

Malaysia notified detection of AHS on 2 September 2020. To date, there are very few details about this incursion and the Malaysian competent authorities' response. The index cases (5 horses with clinical signs such as fever, dyspnoea, lameness, and hind limb oedema) were located on a single property in Terengganu. Control measures put in place include movement controls, surveillance, quarantine, zoning, control of vectors and surveillance. At this stage vaccination and treatment are not being considered.

While the usual vector, *Culicoides imicola*, is known to be present in Thailand, it has not been recorded in the Malaysian peninsula. It is possible that the Malaysian occurrence of AHS could be associated with the spread of the known vector to a new region, or with species previously unconfirmed as competent vectors becoming involved. This occurrence could also be due to movement of infected horses directly from Thailand.

From OIE WAHIS: Location of current Malaysian AHS outbreak

AUSTRALIA'S BIOSECURITY POLICY

Australia's import conditions for horses are based on the *2013 Import risk analysis report for horses from approved countries: final policy review*. They require that horses be imported only from approved countries that have been free from AHS for the 2 years prior to export, that AHS is compulsorily notifiable in those countries, and that imported horses have not been vaccinated against AHS in the 60 days prior to export. Australia's import conditions for equine semen require approved countries to be free from AHS for two years prior to collection and that vaccination against AHS was not practiced for 12 months prior to collection.

AHS has not been detected in any country approved for import of horses or equine semen into Australia. The OIE Code article 12.1.2 recommends that an AHS free country or zone adjacent to an infected country/zone should include a surveillance zone as part of establishing its AHS free status. Horses imported from approved northern hemisphere countries must transit/tranship through countries in South East Asia or the Middle East. Currently one of the airport transit hubs for horses en route to Australia is Singapore, an approved country adjacent to Malaysia.

IMPACTS ON AUSTRALIAN EQUINE INDUSTRY

Although *Culicoides imicola* is not present in Australia, other *Culicoides* spp are present in Australia and are considered potential vectors for AHS. This means that there is the potential for establishment and spread of AHS in Australia, should an infected animal enter. AHS could be very difficult to eradicate should it establish in regions with high equid and vector populations.

It is noteworthy that AHS is one of the few global diseases for which the OIE has a formal process to establish country freedom. AHS is classified as category 3 disease under the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement (EADRA) meaning that the government would cover 50% of the emergency animal response. Due to high morbidity and mortality rates, the impact on the equine population of an incursion would be significant. The emergency animal disease response would include control measures consistent with the OIE requirements, such as movement controls and vector controls,

and subsequent surveillance to underpin any claim of AHS-freedom to the satisfaction of key trading partners. This would have substantial costs.
If AHS were detected (and not necessarily established) in Australia, the international trade in horses and zoo equids from Australia would be markedly affected. Trading partners do not currently recognise zoning or compartmentalisation for AHS. It is unlikely that any such arrangements could be established quickly, and negotiation of new export protocols could be protracted, following an incursion. There would likely be flow on effects for temporary imports, such as international racehorses and shuttle stallions, which may not travel to Australia if they could not be re-exported. Those effects would have much broader consequences for the breeding and racing industries.

DEPARTMENT ACTIONS

Following the detection in Malaysia, the department has been liaising with regional partners, including Singapore, about immediate AHS risk management. Discussions have also covered whether a coordinated regional response to the emerging threat of the AHS is feasible. The department has offered technical collaboration on activities such as vector surveillance and control.

In addition, the department is reviewing its transportation policy for live horses and providing input into the AHS AUSVETPLAN update.