



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References
Committee Inquiry report:

Feasibility of a national horse traceability register for all horses

SEPTEMBER 2020

Introduction

The Australian Government welcomes the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee inquiry report on the Feasibility of a national horse traceability register for all horses.

The Australian Government agrees that a national horse traceability register could support some biosecurity activities, however notes that this inquiry and the need for a register was driven by other concerns, including rider safety and horse welfare.

It is important that agriculture ministers and racing ministers in every state and territory work collectively to establish a national horse register. Establishing a register will require a high degree of cooperation with significant policy and regulatory work by states and territories in consultation with the horse industry.

Australia already has a number of national livestock registration and traceability schemes in place—for food producing animals—to manage food safety, enable disease investigations, and meet market access requirements. These may provide a useful model on which to design, establish, legislate and enforce a national horse register. In Australia, horses are not used for food production and so are not covered by these systems.

There are a range of existing horse industry systems that identify horses including microchips, brands, horse passports, or silhouettes, that are sufficient to support the import and export requirements of horses to and from Australia.

The report recognises there are a range of potential drivers across the various horse industry sectors, such as rider safety, horse welfare and biosecurity, for an ongoing national traceability register and there would be a significant cost to the public associated with establishing a register. Previous attempts by states and territories to establish systems which would assist in horse traceability have been abandoned because of the prohibitive cost involved.

The recommended register may benefit states and territories, who are responsible for biosecurity enforcement within their jurisdictions. While all jurisdictions already require properties holding horses be registered, the recommended national horse traceability register for all horses could compliment this existing system in managing horse diseases.

The Australian Government response follows, addressing each of the Senate Committee's 18 recommendations.

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends the Department of Agriculture establishes a national horse traceability working group, under the auspices of the Agriculture Senior Officials Committee, to progress the development and implementation of a national horse traceability register. The group should report its findings to the Agriculture Senior Officials Committee within 12-months of its establishment.

The Australian Government agrees in part with this recommendation.

The Australian Government supports the approach of establishing a national horse traceability working group to advise on the design, development and implementation of a national horse traceability register.

Responsibility for developing, legislating and enforcing animal welfare standards rests with state and territory governments. Within Australia, biosecurity and animal welfare legislation and enforcement is also the responsibility of the states and territories. As such, the Commonwealth does not have relevant powers to establish a national horse register.

At the Agriculture Ministers' Forum on 21 February 2020, agriculture ministers agreed that a working group, co-led by Victoria and Queensland, with support from other states and territories, in consultation with industry, will develop a proposal for a national horse register. The Australian Government expects that the working group will work closely with industry in developing a proposal for the register.

The Australian Government supports the establishment of a national horse register and notes that establishing a national register for all horses will require policy and regulatory design work to be undertaken by racing and animal welfare portfolios in each state and territory.

It is expected that the working group will report its progress to develop a register to racing and agricultural ministers via state and territory government racing officials and the Agriculture Senior Officials Committee.

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends Animal Health Australia becomes a member of the national horse traceability working group, and in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, ensures a horse traceability register aligns with and bolsters the Australian Government's biosecurity responsibilities.

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

This recommendation will be drawn to the attention of the state and territories through the Agriculture Senior Officials Committee, as membership of the national horse traceability working group is a decision for the states and territories.

It is important that the working group includes government and industry representation, to bring the relevant experience and knowledge that will need to be considered in the design of the register.

The Australian Government notes that it is desirable for the horse traceability register to align with the Australian Government's biosecurity responsibilities where appropriate.

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that the national horse traceability working group works towards establishing a national horse traceability register that, at its core, serves a biosecurity function.

The Australian Government agrees in part with this recommendation.

The Australian Government agrees that a national horse traceability register could support some biosecurity activities, such as if there was a disease outbreak, but notes that this register was also proposed for rider safety and animal welfare reasons. There are currently no animal traceability requirements in the *Biosecurity Act 2015* (C'th).

For food producing animals, Australian jurisdictions require individual or mob-based identification systems to be in place so that animals (and their products) can be traced from farm of birth to slaughter, to manage food safety, enable disease investigations, and provide market access.

In Australia, horses are used for racing, equestrian activities and working on farms and recreation, but not for food production. There are a range of industry systems that identify horses including microchips, brands, horse passports, or silhouettes. These systems are sufficient to support the import and export requirements of horses to and from Australia. In addition, while not as comprehensive as the identification systems for food producing animals, all jurisdictions require properties holding horses to be registered, enabling better management of horse diseases.

The Australian Government considers that the proposed national horse traceability working group should examine the practicality, scope and cost-benefit of the different potential elements and functions of a national horse traceability register.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that the national horse traceability working group consults with the horse industry to develop a national register that is populated by data found on existing industry databases. This data-sharing arrangement should:

- be shared through the use of block chain (or equivalent) technology that enables regular and secure data transfers between registers;
- allow for one horse to be registered across multiple industry registers; and
- at a minimum, include the following data—
 - a microchip number (including a universal equine life number);
 - a Property Identification Code;
 - owner's contact details and location; and
 - the origin of the source data.

The Australian Government agrees in part with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established. The Australian Government agrees that the national horse traceability working group should consult with the horse industry.

The precise details of the data-sharing arrangement and technology used will depend on the purpose, scope and design of a national register, to be developed and agreed on by the jurisdictions and industry in conjunction with the working group.

Recommendation 5

The committee recommends a national horse register is designed to accommodate data uploads by horse owners that are not associated with any industry group, such as farmers, the recreational sector and horse owners in remote locations.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established. The Australian Government recognises that there are many different types of horse owners and many are not likely to be associated with any formal industry group.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that the national horse traceability working group works towards a national horse traceability register design that enables additional features to be incorporated into the system as it progresses, and allows for the horse industry to take responsibility for any future functionality amendments. Such functionality amendments could assist with improving animal welfare, emergency response management, rider safety and the integrity of trade in horses.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established.

The Australian Government supports a staged approach to the development of the register with the option of adding extended functionality in future if necessary.

Existing national livestock traceability and register schemes may offer a model for how to approach the design, establishment, legislation and enforcement of a scheme in the horse industry and should be considered by the national horse traceability working group.

States and territories will need to undertake significant policy and regulatory work in consultation with the horse industry as the functions of the register must be supported by state and territory legislation.

Recommendation 7

The committee recommends that the national horse traceability working group consults with the United Kingdom's Central Equine Database and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to help inform the development of an Australian equivalent register.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established. The Australian Government recognises the merit of examining overseas systems to assist development of an effective Australian register.

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends that the national horse traceability working group, in partnership with the racing industry, works towards the development of a national horse traceability register that compliments efforts by the racing industry to track retired horses.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government agrees that it would be beneficial for the national horse traceability register to complement existing efforts by industry, including existing systems and data, to track retired horses.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established.

Recommendation 9

The committee recommends that the national horse traceability working group engages with owners of abattoirs and knackerries to integrate a national horse traceability register into processing practices for horses.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government agrees that it would be beneficial for the working group to consult with owners and managers of abattoirs and knackerries in the development of the register in order to investigate opportunities to integrate a national horse traceability register into processing practices and facilities for horses.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established.

The degree to which the register is integrated into processing practices will need to be determined in light of the scope of the register and how it will be implemented by the states and territories.

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that the Department of Agriculture ensures the national horse traceability working group considers designing a national horse traceability register that meets the European Union's horsemeat trade standards.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established. While horse traceability is already a prerequisite of market access to the European Union, the working group may identify opportunities to improve existing traceability requirements, and afford greater market access and animal welfare outcomes.

Recommendation 11

The committee recommends representatives from the horse industry, including the Australian Horse Industry Council, the racing industry and animal welfare representatives, such as from the RSPCA, become members of the national horse traceability working group.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established.

The Australian Government supports the states and territories creating a working group comprised of representatives from industry, racing and animal welfare portfolios. It is important that membership of the working group is diverse and appropriately captures a broad range of knowledge and experience in systems design and regulation.

If the working group does not include the suggested members, it would be desirable for the working group to establish regular interaction with them and to seek their input during the design process.

Recommendation 12

The committee recommends the national horse traceability working group consider the adoption of a co-investment model that obliges Commonwealth, state and territory governments, as well as the horse industry, to provide the necessary seed funding required for a national horse traceability register.

The Australian Government agrees in part with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established.

A national horse registration and traceability system could have substantial resourcing impact for states and territories, industry groups, farmers, and others with horses, such as pet owners and riding schools.

The Australian Government agrees that the adoption of a co-investment model is desirable, however decisions about how a register is funded is likely to be a matter for state and territory racing ministers and racing agencies.

Recommendation 13

The committee recommends that, if microchipping is a requirement under a national traceability register, the national horse traceability working group considers a phased approach to the microchipping requirement.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established. A phased approach is sensible, given that microchipping requires investment from stakeholders. It could involve a pilot trial followed by extension of the scheme.

Recommendation 14

The committee recommends the national horse traceability working group consider the viability of integrating a biometric identification function into a national horse traceability register.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The national horse traceability working group will be best placed to consider this recommendation and it will be drawn to their attention.

Recommendation 15

The committee recommends the national horse traceability working group considers the key challenges identified by the Integrity Systems Company concerning compliance and enforcement, which include:

- defining the role of industry versus the role of government concerning compliance and enforcement;
- the reduction of resources to support compliance and enforcement over time; and
- the penalties applied to breaches of traceability, which fail to discourage non-compliance.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established.

The Australian Government acknowledges that the issues identified will need to be addressed during design of the national horse traceability register.

Recommendation 16

The committee recommends the national horse traceability working group considers the educational requirements needed to re-inforce industry compliance with a national horse traceability register.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established.

The Australian Government acknowledges the importance of education to encourage compliance with a new register and supports the working group considering communications and educational requirements once the scope and functionality of the register has been decided.

Recommendation 17

The committee recommends the national horse traceability working group engages the Integrity Systems Company's expertise to progress a national horse traceability register.

The Australian Government agrees in part with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established.

The Australian Government agrees that the expertise of the Integrity Systems Company could be valuable to the working group, however the national horse traceability register may have to differ from the National Livestock Identification System (NLIS) for a range of reasons such as the different way animals are identified and sold, and because of the NLIS focus on ensuring food safety. The ownership of livestock registered under the NLIS is transferred via saleyard auctions, 'over the hook' direct to abattoirs, through forward contracts, as well as private sales. This system is driven by food safety and access to markets, as well as biosecurity.

The working group will need to engage with experts in traceability systems to help consider the scope and functionality of the register.

Recommendation 18

The committee recommends that the national horse traceability working group works towards the adoption of a trial program following the establishment of a national horse traceability register. The trial may be applied to a single or collection of jurisdictions, or alternatively, be applied to specific sectors of the horse industry.

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government will bring this recommendation to the attention of the national horse traceability working group once the working group has been established.

The Australian Government agrees that is desirable to begin with a trial that may involve a sector of the horse industry or be applied to a single or collection of jurisdictions.