

VET COMMUNIQUÉ – September 2020

Animal Health Committee (AHC) provides veterinary leadership and technical expertise for Australia's animal health systems. AHC includes the Australian, state and territory chief veterinary officers (CVOs), and the Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness; with Animal Health Australia and Wildlife Health Australia as observers. The committee reports to the National Biosecurity Committee. This communiqué covers the major topics discussed at meeting 38 held 8-10 September 2020.

Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and social distancing responsibilities, AHC used a virtual online forum for their meeting. This included guest presentations from the New Zealand Ministry for Primary Industries, and the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority. A stakeholder session will be held on 25 September 2020.

African swine fever taskforce

Before the meeting, members and stakeholders undertook a survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the African swine fever (ASF) taskforce, convened in October 2019 to provide national guidance for ASF policy, industry issues and cooperation in preparation for a potential ASF outbreak.

The national collaboration between AHC and industry worked extremely well and led to both sectors gaining a much better understanding of each other. There was excellent leadership and judicious use of technical expertise.

The taskforce model was practical and efficient, with 85% of those surveyed indicating they thought the model was suitable for preparedness planning for other diseases.

A stakeholder session is planned for ASF working group members to showcase the outcomes of their work.

COVID-19 pandemic

AHC discussed what was learned from the COVID-19 pandemic response and how this could be applied to future animal biosecurity and One Health responses.

Key issues identified included understanding of disease characteristics; appropriate decision making; data management; good communication; remote interface capabilities; control measures; and following a One Health approach.

Resource sharing and creating size in our workforce when needed are crucial for effective disease responses. AHC will discuss this with the National Biosecurity Committee, and direct their attention to data sharing capacity across jurisdictions, working partnerships across departments, and utilisation of defence personnel.

Emerging vector-borne viruses

The recent emergence of African horse sickness and Lumpy skin disease across Southeast Asia poses an increasing risk to Australia. The viruses are primarily transmitted by biting insects, some of which may be able to get to Australia. Infection of animals with these viruses can have serious economic and social consequences. The clinical severity of these diseases also poses a significant threat to animal welfare.

AHC agreed that further evaluation should be undertaken to identify significant gaps in preparedness and surveillance activities.

Ehrlichia canis

Surveillance is continuing across the country to determine the distribution of *Ehrlichia canis* following positive test results in Western Australia and the Northern Territory earlier this year. Media campaigns and tick control programs are also underway. AHC will meet again next month to discuss results of the surveillance and communication activities, and the next steps for Australia.

Nationally agreed standard operating procedures

A suite of Nationally Agreed Standard Operating Procedures (NASOPs), to support national consistency and provide guidance to jurisdictions during an emergency animal disease response, are available on Animal Health Australia's website. Ten NASOPs were recently revised by an external consultant. AHC will consider the revised documents out-of-session as well as options for the future management, coordination, and custodianship of the NASOPs.

Farewell Bruce Christie

Department of Primary Industries' Deputy Director General (and former CVO) Bruce Christie attended the meeting to provide an update on the National Biosecurity Committee.

Bruce will be retiring later this year after an extensive career in the animal health sector. We express our sincere gratitude to Bruce for the significant contribution he has made and wish him the very best in his next chapter.