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Horse industry unites to fight exotic diseases

A landmark agreement proposed by Animal Health Australia has received universal support by all sectors of the Australian horse industry and by a Senate committee which tabled its report on Friday.

Western Australian Senator Dr Chris Back, an equine veterinarian, has strongly endorsed the recommendations of the Rural Affairs and Transport References committee which has examined the implications of the industry Emergency Animal Disease Response agreement.

Senator Back said once horse industry representatives sign up, the federal government can immediately coordinate a nationwide response in the event that any one of the 22 exotic diseases affecting horses was detected in Australia.

Hendra, rabies, and equine influenza are examples of such diseases.

All other animal industry sectors in Australia have signed up to an EADRA equivalent.

This will now ensure federal, state and territory government resources can be effectively mobilised in the event of an Australian outbreak of an exotic horse disease.

Under the Australian Constitution, animal disease management is the role of each state and territory.

Dr Back said Australia had a wake-up call when Equine Influenza was diagnosed in 2007.

"The direct cost of eradicating EI exceeded \$300 million but the true cost in lost earnings, betting taxes, interrupted racing and breeding programs and cancelled horse events in several states exceeded \$1 billion," he said.

"In fact, the industry is still feeling the effects.

"While EI was highly contagious, it did not kill many horses," he said.

"If we were to get African Horse Sickness or any other insect-borne neurological disease, we could lose tens of thousands of horses before it could be brought under control.

"We have the insect species which is capable of carrying some of these diseases here in Australia."

Glanders, a disease first identified in the third century AD, has recently been diagnosed in the Persian Gulf. Horses have been put down in an attempt to control the disease.

The Gulf is only 10 hours flying time from Australia.

Dr Back congratulated Animal Health Australia for its role in coordinating meetings of the horse industry sectors to explain the implications of signing up to the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement.

"Towards an Australian community in which every member is safe, feels valued and contributes to a sustainable future."

"A hearing held by the Senate committee recently in Canberra, showed there was clear evidence of understanding, goodwill and common purpose across the industry," he said.

The horse industry, in all its aspects - commercial, recreational, performance and breeding - is a multi-billion dollar enterprise, employing in excess of 100,000 people.

The time has arrived for stakeholders to unite.

"By speaking with one voice, the industry will achieve more when dealing with Government".

"Hopefully signing up to the EADRA is the catalyst for all industry sectors to see the benefit of this approach," Dr Back said.