

Friday 1 July 2011

Hendra virus the cause of horse death on NSW North Coast

NSW Department of Primary Industries veterinarians today confirmed Hendra virus as the cause of death of one horse yesterday near Wollongbar on the NSW North Coast.

“The property has been placed in quarantine and the dead horse has been buried,” NSW Chief Veterinary Officer Ian Roth said.

“The horse was suffering from fever when examined by a private veterinarian on Tuesday this week.

“Following a rapid deterioration in the horse’s condition on Wednesday, the veterinarian euthanised the horse at 1am yesterday.”

Mr Roth said samples from the dead horse were sent to DPI’s Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute for laboratory analysis and results confirmed the Hendra virus.

He said there was no current link to the recent Hendra outbreak at Beaudesert in Queensland, involving the death of one horse and the quarantining of two properties.

“The horse had been in a paddock containing a fig tree, so it is likely that flying foxes were the source of infection,” he said.

“Hendra virus can spread from flying foxes to horses and, rarely, from horses to people.

“There is one other horse on the Wollongbar property and it is currently in good health.

“Horse movements on and off the property are being checked by veterinary staff.”

Mr Roth said Hendra virus can cause a range of clinical signs in horses.

“Hendra should be considered in horses where there is acute onset of fever and rapid progression to death associated with either respiratory or nervous signs.

“Hendra virus is a notifiable disease - if you suspect the presence of this disease in horses, you must report it. Call Emergency Disease Watch Hotline - 1800 675 888.”

NSW Health Director of Health Protection Dr Jeremy McAnulty said that nine people who have had close contact with the infected horse will be closely monitored for any symptoms of the infection. Public health unit staff have interviewed these people to assess their level of exposure.

An expert panel of public health and infectious diseases physicians from Queensland and NSW was convened this afternoon to provide expert advice. The panel assessed all contacts as having exposure ranging from negligible to medium level to the infected horse.

These people will be closely monitored by public health unit staff. Blood tests were taken where appropriate and will be repeated at 3 and 6 weeks.

“All of the human infections that have occurred in the past have been linked to high level exposures to infected horses.

“There has been no evidence of human-to-human or flying fox-to-human spread of Hendra virus.”

“Horses may shed Hendra virus before they show any signs of illness so it is always important to use good hygiene practices when around horses,” Dr McAnulty said.

NSW Health advises people to always take the following steps to reduce the risk of becoming infected with Hendra virus:

- Cover any cuts or abrasions on exposed skin before handling horses and wash your hands well with soap and water, especially after handling your horse's mouth or nose (eg fitting or removing a bridle) and before eating, smoking or touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Don't kiss horses on the muzzle (especially not if the horse is sick).
- Use personal protective equipment to protect yourself from the body fluids of horses.

NSW Health Hendra virus Factsheet can be on the NSW Health website:

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets/infectious/hendra.html>

NSW DPI advises horse owners to take precautions in areas with flying foxes - to reduce the risk of their horses becoming infected:

- Place feed and water containers under cover.
- Do not place feed and water under trees, especially trees with fruit.
- Do not use feed that could attract flying foxes, such as apples, carrots, or molasses.
- If possible, remove horses from paddocks where flowering trees have temporarily attracted flying foxes.
- If removing horses is not possible, take horses out during times of peak flying fox activity, usually at dusk and during the night.

More information on Hendra virus is available on website www.agriculture.nsw.gov.au/info/hendra

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