



Equine Influenza - Reflections Ten Years On by Dr Patricia Ellis

The date Friday 24 August 2007 will forever be etched in my memory as the day my worst nightmare came true.

On the afternoon on that day, I learned from Dr Bruce Christie, CVO NSW that an outbreak of equine influenza (EI), an extremely infectious disease of horses and foreign to our shores, was suspected in NSW. I prayed that we were prepared!

I first became conscious of the huge risk that EI posed to the Australian horse industry in 1987 after an EI outbreak had a severe and prolonged socioeconomic impact on a similarly naïve horse population in South Africa in late 1986. The next twenty years of my life were spent, wearing various veterinary, government and industry hats, working with others to promote contingency planning for an EI outbreak in Australia.

The last EI infection of Australian horses occurred on 25 December 2007 and after gathering evidence for proof of freedom, Australia declared freedom from EI on 30 June 2008.

Why was Australia successful in containing and eradicating EI?

Australia was able to beat the odds in this big country because we had:-

- **Tools and agreed plans in place prior to the outbreak** - rapid diagnostic tests, EADRA, AUSVETPLAN, AHA training programs, harmonised State legislation
- **Teams** – industry, veterinarians and government people trained in their roles and responsibilities.
- **Track record** - underpinning experience from the earlier eradication of bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis from Australia.
- **Trust** – government /industry partnership and engagement.
- **Tenacity** - Australia continued to work toward eradication in the face of opposition from self-interested parties, politicians and international "experts" during a gruelling journey of over 10 months.

Australian Horse Industry Council

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What lessons have been learned?

- Prior planning and preparation do pay off.
- AHIC played an important industry role in management of the EI response but was poorly supported by fragmented non-racing sectors of the horse industry. Has anything changed?
- Emergency response managers need to know where horses are located. Every horse property in Australia should have a Property Identification Code.
- LLI training should be focussed on those who will be out of work because of an outbreak.
- Planning for management of the conflict between eradication and business continuity is very important. Horse events = horse movement = risk of spread but when/if possible, business needs to continue e.g. the Purple Zone.
- All equestrian enterprises and events, large and small, need to develop biosecurity plans for disease outbreak/suspicion supported by rules. Spread of EI before movement controls were imposed was NOT facilitated by race meetings but by equestrian events.
- Refusal to permit on-going EI vaccination after EI was eradicated was supported by sound science. Over the past ten years this has saved the Australian horse industry millions of dollars.
- **Complacency is the real enemy. Ten years on are we still prepared?**

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