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10 August 2010

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into Biosecurity and Quarantine Arrangements

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 6,300 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, including cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

The government's response to the Beale Review has been implemented in part. The AVA seeks full implementation of the matters included in the Government's response. The major issues are addressed in this submission. While there are costs involved, the AVA strongly urged the importance of ensuring our biosecurity and quarantine systems are able to protect our agricultural industries, as well as human and animal health.

The attached submission addresses several of the terms of reference of the Inquiry.

I would be available to address the Committee in person if this would be of assistance.

Yours faithfully

Dr Barry Smyth
President

Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
Inquiry into Biosecurity and Quarantine
Submission from the Australian Veterinary Association

Executive Summary

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Its 6300 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Further details are on the AVA website www.ava.com.au.

In this submission the term **biosecurity** refers to the protection of the economy, environment and human health from the negative impacts associated with entry, establishment or spread of introduced pests, diseases and weeds. **Quarantine** is defined as the system of measures used to manage risks of the entry and establishment of pests or diseases which threaten animal, plant or human health.

Recommendations:

1. Enhance Australia's animal quarantine and biosecurity through full implementation of the recommendations of the Beale Review. The Commonwealth should increase its biosecurity investment by \$260 million per annum. Some of this cost could be recovered. Another \$225m over several years is needed for IT infrastructure.
2. Agree with the states to link activities and ensure commitment to a strong quarantine continuum of pre-border, border and post-border.
3. Maintain and expand the role of veterinary practitioners in animal disease control through the Australian Veterinary Reserve and related programs. These programs should be extended to increase standards of on-farm biosecurity.
4. Full implementation of the Australian Veterinary Practitioner Surveillance Network to ensure appropriately qualified and trained professionals are monitoring the health status of animals in all parts of Australia.
5. A national initiative is urgently needed to bolster veterinary services in rural areas and ensure that expertise is available in food-producing areas to identify and respond to emergency animal diseases.
6. Expand the training of veterinary pathologists through the Australian Animal Disease Diagnosis Training Initiative. This will help curb an impending shortage of qualified pathologists needed to monitor and respond to infectious animal diseases.
7. The Animal Quarantine Stations are nearing the end of their useful lives and a replacement strategy is crucial.
8. A Centre for Emerging infectious Diseases is urgently needed to assume the functions of the terminated Biosecurity Cooperative Research Centre. A *Forum on One Health* will be required to obtain key stakeholder and jurisdictional input to improve integration between animal and human health and handling of zoonotic diseases.
9. The *Quarantine Act 1908* needs to be updated.

This submission addresses the terms of reference of the inquiry.

a) **the adequacy of current biosecurity and quarantine arrangements, including resourcing;**

Australia's agricultural productivity and access to world markets are dependent on freedom from animal diseases. Demonstration of disease freedom relies on effective means of surveillance, early detection and early response to demonstrate the absence or distribution of diseases.

Effective biosecurity requires a continuum of pre-border, border and post-border surveillance and detection. The 2007 equine influenza outbreak, and the subsequent findings of the Callinan Inquiry, highlighted that several key areas of the biosecurity continuum that depend on veterinary science and veterinarians are under resourced.

With increased investment in pre-border and border quarantine, it is vital that post-border considerations are not forgotten. There is a need to focus on filling the obvious gaps in our post-border preparedness.

Recommendation 1 Enhance Australia's animal quarantine and biosecurity through **full implementation of the recommendations of the Beale Review**. The Commonwealth should increase its biosecurity investment by \$260 million per annum. Some of this cost could be recovered. Another \$225m over several years is needed for IT infrastructure.

Recommendation 2 Agree with the states to **link activities and ensure commitment** to a strong quarantine continuum of pre-border, border and post-border.

Governments are supported by veterinary practitioners through the Australian Veterinary Reserve (AVR) and related activities such as the Australian Veterinary Practitioner Surveillance Network. Both need to be augmented.

The AVR was developed to provide Australia with a specialist force of veterinarians from the private sector, with skills that could be deployed within a national response to an emergency animal disease outbreak (EAD). The initial training program allowed for 100 AVR members. The deployment of the AVR and other practitioners during the equine influenza outbreak in August 2007 in Australia highlighted that the value of veterinarians trained in biosecurity and working in government response programs.

With the continued winding down state government veterinary services, the capacity to respond to an EAD outbreak in the future has been progressively reduced. An EAD response will require enough human resources to withstand the surge in demand for expertise, and the ability to rotate personnel to allow rest and recreation. Private veterinary practitioners will be crucial to mounting an adequate response to large-scale EAD outbreaks.

Recommendation 3 Maintain and expand the role of veterinary practitioners in animal disease control through the **Australian Veterinary Reserve** and related programs. These programs should be extended to increase standards of on-farm biosecurity.

Recommendation 4 Full implementation of the **Australian Veterinary Practitioner Surveillance Network** to ensure appropriately qualified and trained professionals are monitoring the health status of animals in all parts of Australia.

b) **projected demand and resourcing requirements**

Australia urgently needs a national rural veterinary services initiative to encourage veterinarians into rural and regional areas. This should be based on forgiveness of HECS debt. It could apply at the rate of one year of HECS for each year spent in rural practice in areas designated under the Rural and Regional Area Classification Scheme. Similar programs have already been introduced into USA and New Zealand.

Most states had regional veterinary organisations until the 1980s. Each jurisdiction was divided into regions or districts, a regional (or district) veterinary officer was supported by veterinary officers and stock inspectors. Regulatory activities and recording were based on "farm files" which recorded disease and welfare and provided the basis for certification.

Budget cutbacks reduced this infrastructure, leaving some states without regional systems. Greater reliance was then placed on the private sector. The private sector input to food animal work has been undermined by successive droughts and the poor income from the sector. The states and territories were placed under additional strain by the termination of the agency arrangement for quarantine. Many veterinarians in rural areas have turned to companion animal work to maintain financial sustainability.

Rural veterinary practitioners have been at forefront of disease detection and surveillance. Now is the time to invest in veterinary resources in rural areas.

Recommendation 5 A national initiative is urgently needed to bolster **veterinary services in rural areas** and ensure that expertise is available in food-producing areas to identify and respond to emergency animal diseases.

The quarantine continuum needs support from scientists to identify diseases and help manage outbreaks. There is a serious impending shortages of veterinary pathologists and related disciplines that has arisen from the winding back of state government pathology services and an aging workforce. If this shortage is not addressed, it will be impossible to respond to an emergency animal disease outbreak of any size.

This shortage can be addressed through the Australian Animal Disease Training Initiative (AADTI) which is based on recommendations made jointly by Australian Veterinary Boards Council, the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists and the Australian Veterinary Association and the universities.

Recommendation 6 Expand the training of veterinary pathologists through the Australian Animal Disease Diagnosis Training Initiative. This will help curb an impending shortage of qualified pathologists needed to monitor and respond to infectious animal diseases.

Horse imports and imports of some other species are based on pre-departure quarantine (PEQ) and post-arrival quarantine (PAQ). PAQ is performed in Australia in government and private quarantine stations, and in quarantine approved premises, depending on the species and other factors. Currently there are 5 government quarantine stations.

- Eastern Creek, near Sydney – small animals bees and horses
- Spotswood, inner Melbourne – horses, birds (high security) and small animals (farm animals have been held there in the past)
- Byford (Perth) – small animals
- Torrens Island – horses, small animals and poultry (imported as surface sterilised hatching eggs)

The leases on these sites will expire from now until 2015. We are advised that the lease for Eastern Creek AQS has been extended to December 2015 but that the new lease price has

not been finalised. No further extension of the lease is possible. It is understood that some of the quarantine stations are at the end of their serviceable lives.

The Cocos Islands (high security) Quarantine Station is no longer operative but there is an option of opening it again for special purposes.

The AVA believes that AQIS needs to look strategically at quarantine requirements for the next 30 years. We understand that there is a mandated two-pass capital works process for all works over \$30 million. This process would take a year or more to complete, so the government needs to consider quarantine station business planning in the 2011-12 Budget.

Recommendation 7 The Animal Quarantine Stations are nearing the end of their useful lives and a replacement strategy is crucial.

c) progress toward achievement of reform of Australian Quarantine and Inspection service export fees and charges

The level of fees is important in facilitating quarantine functions and in equity. Availability of services such as access to quarantine stations is a national resource and is important in efforts to minimise illegal importations of some commodities and genetic material.

d) progress in implementation of the 'Beale Review' recommendations and their place in meeting projected biosecurity demand and resourcing; and

It is vital that the Beale recommendations be implemented in full, with the recommended increase in the Commonwealth's biosecurity investment by \$260 million per annum. Some of this could be cost recovered. Beale also recommended another \$225m over several years for IT infrastructure and an agreement with the states to link activities and ensure commitment.

e) any related matters.

The Australian Biosecurity Cooperative Research Centre for Emerging Infectious Disease was terminated in June 2010. The essential work of the CRC must continue. This can be achieved through establishment of a Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases, linking current institutions for research and diagnosis in human and animal health, to facilitate effective sharing of knowledge and develop tools to manage emergency animal diseases, especially zoonoses. This approach would increase funding for veterinary research through access to the Australian Research Council, National Health and Medical Research Council and other bodies.

Recommendation 8 A **Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases** is urgently needed to assume the functions of the terminated Biosecurity Cooperative Research Centre. A *Forum on One Health* will be required to obtain key stakeholder and jurisdictional input to improve integration between animal and human health and handling of zoonotic diseases.

The Australian quarantine and biosecurity system is supported by Commonwealth, state and territory laws and regulations. Local government also plays an important role in the delivery of some aspects of quarantine and biosecurity regulation, such as food safety and public health.

The Commonwealth quarantine and biosecurity laws are contained in the *Quarantine Act 1908* (the Act) and subordinate legislation including the *Quarantine Regulations 2000*, the *Quarantine Proclamation 1998*, the *Quarantine (Cocos Islands) Proclamation 2004* and the *Quarantine (Christmas Island) Proclamation 2004*.

While the Act was amended significantly in response to the 1996 Nairn review, its core was drafted over a century ago.

Recommendation 9 The *Quarantine Act 1908* needs to be updated.

*The Australian Veterinary Association
August 2010*