



11 August, 2010

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

Dear Sir or Madam,

**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO BIOSECURITY & QUARANTINE ARRANGEMENTS:
AUSTRALIAN WILDLIFE HEALTH NETWORK (AWHN)**

Please find attached a submission to the inquiry into biosecurity and quarantine arrangements regarding feral animals, native wildlife and Australia's biosecurity.

The submission represents a collation of comments from the Australian Wildlife Health Network management group. The comments represent the views of the AWHN management group and not necessarily those of individual members. Members represent most of Australia's government organisations and NGOs with an interest in, and carriage of, issues relating to animals, wildlife and biosecurity in Australia and its territories, including the Australian Antarctic Territory. More than 300 organisations and individuals participate in the Network from around Australia and overseas (see attachment 1 for an overview of the AWHN).

It is important for the Review Panel to be aware that feral animals and wildlife represent a threat to Australia's biosecurity and that a real need exists to better address the infrastructure, processes and policies required to identify, quantify and address the risks posed to Australia by diseases with feral animals and wildlife as part of their ecology.

Failure to address this need will leave Australia at an unacceptable level of risk to its trade, human health and biodiversity.

Impacts of diseases with wildlife as part of their ecology are emerging issues. SARS, Ebola, Hendra virus and H5N1 are diseases that affect humans that have come from wildlife. We do not know what will be next, however there will be a next. We need to know what is normal so that we can recognise a new condition, and we need to be able to diagnose exotic diseases. Building capacity in this area is really about an insurance policy. The wildlife disease area is still a frontier area of disease control.

The identification of chytridiomycosis, a disease of amphibians causing extinctions around the world and in Australia took 19 years; identification of Tasmanian Devil Facial Tumour took 10 years – because of this disease there is a real threat that Tasmanian Devils may become extinct in the wild in the next 25 years. We need to be able to understand these conditions more quickly. We can do better, and we need to do better.

The AWHN management group supports and encourages the full implementation of the recommendations contained within the Beale Review. However, we feel that more emphasis needs to be placed on environment and biodiversity considerations and a focus should be placed on development of sustainable, cost-sharing mechanisms between key Commonwealth government agencies (Health, Environment and Biosecurity) to enable Australia to better address the risks posed to its biosecurity by diseases with wildlife as part of their ecology.

We hope that this submission helps you with this important work and would be happy to discuss it further should you require additional information or clarification.

Best Wishes,

Rupert Woods
Manager, AWHN

INQUIRY INTO BIOSECURITY & QUARANTINE ARRANGEMENTS: AUSTRALIAN WILDLIFE HEALTH NETWORK (AWHN: THE NETWORK) WILDLIFE SUBMISSION

The importance of wildlife health

- Wildlife health is an emerging issue worldwide.
- The emergence of infectious diseases is increasing with climate change, people and product movements, land use changes.
- The most common source of emerging diseases is wildlife.
- Wildlife health is a critical part of ecosystem health; ecosystem health is a critical part of human and livestock health
- There is a need for a 'one world, one health' approach that is multidisciplinary, involving stakeholders from environment, health and agriculture.
- Feral animals are reservoirs for important diseases and for diseases with wildlife as part of their ecology that can have significant impacts on trade (eg foot and mouth disease, classical swine fever), human health (e.g. SARS, avian influenza, Nipah, Australian bat lyssavirus).
- Australia has international obligations with respect to reporting on wildlife health and it is important to ensure that data is available to support this.
- Prevention of disease outbreaks is a far more cost-effective method than attempting to control outbreaks or eradicate disease. We need a national early warning, surveillance system in place. If wildlife health slipped through the current health/ trade/ environment system, the social, economic and environmental implications of wildlife disease could be enormous.
- Emerging disease is unmanageable unless it is identified and managed quickly. There is a need to invest in monitoring and increasing capacity for rapid response for wildlife disease.
- Without a thorough understanding of the disease status of Australia's wildlife, it is very difficult to make good policy and management decision as the level of risk is difficult to determine.
- Assessment of risk requires diagnostic capability, which is lacking in Australia for many diseases with wildlife as part of their ecology.
- We should also note the importance of wildlife as sentinels and indicators for human health (eg Esperance mass bird mortalities).

The need for a national agency for wildlife health

- It is imperative to have a lead organisation/ construct to focus on wildlife health.
- Cooperative federalism should be advocated: a whole-of-government collaborative one health approach between public and private agencies that involving states/ territories and private entities in meaningful and practical ways is critical.
- A national wildlife health system would underpin Australia's trade, human health, food production, biodiversity and tourism - there are clear and demonstrated benefits of having a national wildlife health program/ structure in place.
- Wildlife health is of vital interest to a wide range of stakeholders — wildlife health is a nationally important issue.

In support of the Wildlife Exotic Disease Preparedness Program (WEDPP) and the Australian Wildlife Health Network (AWHN) specifically

- Better funding is required for wildlife exotic and emerging disease preparedness to ensure Australia has the capacity to respond to an emergency disease outbreak. Australia has existing systems and capacity to manage animal health and has a recognition of the need to better address wildlife health issues by alignment within current systems.
- The Australian Wildlife Health Network (AWHN) is a national initiative of the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry that has been embraced and applauded by stakeholders. Since its establishment AWHN has gained excellent experience, has a proven track record and demonstrates a contemporary awareness that should be embraced.
- The AWHN needs ongoing secure funding to ensure that it can effectively contribute to Australia's animal health system. Secure funding would underpin core work and allow ongoing support and coordination of state, territory and national systems such that wildlife biosecurity issues can be identified and addressed.
- Funding support for AWHN from agriculture, with significant contributions from the key agencies of health and environment, would provide a clear message that Australia understands and embraces the one health concept, and is developing innovative infrastructure to support the concept.
- The Wildlife Exotic Disease Preparedness Program (WEDPP within the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) is a unique and key funding source for

research projects in wildlife and feral animal disease preparedness in Australia. It must continue to be supported as a risk mitigation strategy.

Better support for wildlife in Australia animal health system would:

- 1) Improve the effectiveness of the current limited passive surveillance system for wildlife and increase Australia capacity for targeted surveillance;**
- 2) Ensure Australia has excellent ability to promptly investigate major wildlife incidents of concern and mount an effective response;**
- 3) Investigate and undertake research into on-going or potential impacts that wildlife disease may have on human health, agriculture and biodiversity;**
- 4) sound information to underpin assessment of risk and decision making in this area of Australia's quarantine and biosecurity arrangements.**

Attachment 1: About the Australian Wildlife Health Network (AWHN: the Network)

Background

The Australian Wildlife Health Network (AWHN: the Network) is an unincorporated not for profit organisation that comprises a network of government and private stakeholders across Australia. Its mission is to promote and facilitate collaborative links in the investigation and management of wildlife health (feral and native species) in support of human and animal health, biodiversity and trade.

The core business activity is collaboration with key stakeholders to coordinate wildlife health surveillance and information systems across Australia into a national database, with emphasis on supporting Australia's agriculture, trade, human health and biodiversity. It is stressed that the network coordinates information and expertise in a way that is complimentary to existing organisations and does not duplicate their operations.

The AWHN directly supports the Animal Health Committee, Animal Health Australia and the Office of the Chief Veterinary Officer, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) and Biosecurity Australia (BA) in their efforts to better prepare and protect Australia against the adverse effects of wildlife diseases. It assists in identifying priorities in wildlife health work and assists the states in administering Australia's general wildlife health surveillance system as well as facilitating and coordinating targeted projects.

Representation

The Network is administered under corporate governance. There is a three tiered structure. A management committee, chaired by an appointee from Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, provides strategic direction and advice to an operations committee, which oversees the running of the Network. The coordinator and administrative assistant provide support for the operations and management committees. It is important to note that there is representation on the AWHN governing committees from almost every agency or organisation (both government and NGO) that has a stake or interest in animal and wildlife health issues in Australia. In addition the Network also comprises more than 300 wildlife health professionals and others from around Australia and the rest of the world who have an interest in diseases with feral animals or wildlife as part of their ecology that may impact on Australia's trade, human health and biodiversity.