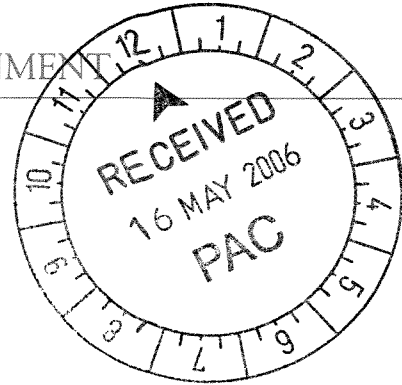




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MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

In reply please quote: MOF22539



Ms N Hay MP
Chair
Legislative Assembly Public Accounts Committee
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

15 MAY 2006

Dear Ms Hay

Managing Animal and Plant Diseases

Thank you for your letter dated 3 April 2006 requesting a submission to the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into managing animal and plant diseases.

Since 2001, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) has worked closely with the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and other relevant agencies/organisations of the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC). In particular, DEC has worked with other agencies to establish clear transport and disposal options in response to an animal health emergency. This work has included participation on working groups reviewing State emergency management plans and taking part in both State and National animal health emergency exercises. A brief summary of the work to date is attached for the Committee's consideration.

DEC officers nominated as contacts for the Committee are:

- *Main contact:* Mr J Woodward, Environmental Services Functional Area Coordinator and Executive Director Operations, Environment Protection and Regulation Division on (02) 9995 5400 (DEC's representative on the SEMC);
or
- Dr K Waples, Manager Wildlife Licensing and Management Unit, Parks and Wildlife Division on (02) 9585 6576 for enquiries relating to disease outbreaks in wildlife.

DEC has no comments to make regarding the *Ovine Johne's Disease Program* as it has not had any involvement with that program.

Yours sincerely

Bob Debus

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND CONSERVATION

SUBMISSION TO PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE REGARDING ANIMAL AND PLANT DISEASES

The 1999 outbreak of a virulent form of Newcastle Disease at Mangrove Mountain, and the outbreak in 2000 of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in the UK, prompted a review of animal health emergency planning, preparedness and response in NSW.

In 2001, the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) formed the FMD Sub-Committee chaired by the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI). The Sub-Committee included representatives from the SEMC Secretariat and the following emergency management functional areas:

- Agricultural Services;
- Environmental Services - coordinated by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC)
- Engineering Services; and
- Transport Services.

This working group liaised closely with Animal Health Australia (AHA) and the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) to review the document *Australian Veterinary Emergency Plan (AUSVETPLAN) Operational Procedures Manual - Disposal (1996)* and develop a uniform national approach to animal health emergencies in terms of biosecurity and the transportation, treatment and disposal of infected carcasses.

The review highlighted many inadequacies in existing procedures in terms of biosecurity and environment protection. The working group produced a report on the *Disposal of Animals, Animal Products and Fomites¹ Associated with an Animal Disease Emergency* (published in 2002). This document covered:

- The relevant legislation of the various jurisdictions
- Transportation, engineering and disposal issues that are likely to occur during an animal health emergency, and
- Possible transportation and engineering solutions to best maintain biosecurity given the persistence of the disease whilst minimising environmental harm.

That document became the basis for a redrafted *AUSVETPLAN Operational Procedures Manual – Disposal*, authored by the NSW working group. AHA is currently reviewing the draft.

Also in 2001, AHA (with DPI coordination) ran FMD response workshops (in Griffith and Young) for emergency response agencies, functional area coordinating agencies and affected industry groups. This was followed by district workshops in other critical agricultural regions of the State.

¹ **Fomites** - generally refers to all other potentially infected materials other than animal carcasses and products. It includes fittings, feed, water etc.

On 7 August 2002, the SEMC held Exercise 'Mithra' to test the state-level response to a FMD outbreak. The lessons learnt from this exercise were applied during the subsequent National FMD Exercise "Minotaur" (9-13 September 2002). For Exercise Minotaur, the State Disease Control Head Quarters and the State Emergency Operations Centre were required to work cooperatively. The State Disease Control Head Quarters was mainly concerned with biosecurity issues and liaison with the Commonwealth whilst the State Emergency Operations Centre dealt with operational issues concerning transport and disposal of carcasses, animal products and fomites. DAFF recently published the evaluation report for Exercise Minotaur. DEC participated in the exercise at the State Emergency Operations Centre.

In 2005, the SEMC reviewed and endorsed the latest revision of the *Animal Health Emergency Sub-Plan* and the *Agricultural Services Functional Area Supporting Plan*.

Since early 2005, with the spread of the H5N1 strain of avian influenza across Asia, the emphasis in animal health issues has shifted to zoonotic² diseases. Through the SEMC, DPI brought relevant agencies together to review current strategies in combating an outbreak of avian influenza. The procedures were tested in a strategic level SEMC Exercise on 24 October 2005.

The National animal health emergency exercise (Exercise Eleusis – 29 November to 1 December 2005) tested the response to an avian influenza outbreak. During this exercise, the principal players in the State Emergency Operations Centre from NSW Health, DPI, DEC, the Ministry of Transport and the Department of Commerce worked together and identified a number of potential disposal methodologies depending upon location, environmental considerations and available resources.

During this exercise, agreement was reached on a hierarchy of potential disposal options for both infected and non-infected animals. A number of other issues such as site decontamination, potential disposal sites, waste transport and biosecurity were considered. Technical and operational issues relating to dangerous goods transport requirements, the slaughter/decontamination/engineering resources, health and safety requirements of response personnel were also addressed. Internally, DEC identified a number of issues relating to biosecurity amongst wild bird populations and these issues were raised and resolved with DPI.

In summary, from DEC's perspective, planning and preparation for potential animal health emergencies has demonstrated that the major environmental issues during an animal health emergency involve the treatment and disposal of animal carcasses, animal products and fomites. These are complex issues that depend on a number of inter-related factors including:

- The specific disease involved and its persistence in the environment
- The animal species involved
- The size and location(s) of the outbreak in terms of local environment and the initial availability of resources

² **Zoonotic** - a disease that can be transmitted from animals to people or, more specifically, a disease that normally exists in animals but that can infect humans.

- Decontamination procedures used
- The containment of run-off and the storage of wastes at the site
- The total mass/volume of infected materials to be disposed of
- The total mass/volume of uninfected putrescible material to be disposed of, such as animals killed to prevent the spread of the disease, unsaleable animal produce etc
- The timely availability of engineering resources
- The need to establish clear waste streams, and assess and classify waste to ensure appropriate disposal of all waste prior to an animal health emergency
- Availability of suitable landfill depots within the affected area
- Timely availability of transport options that can achieve adequate biosecurity
- Dangerous goods transport requirements
- The availability of appropriately trained responders
- The potential vaccination of personnel involved in an animal health emergency involving a zoonotic disease
- The potential vaccination of uninfected animals, and
- Monitoring of on-site disposal if required.

The draft *AUSVETPLAN Operational Procedures Manual – Disposal* is designed to address many of the above issues. However, there remain two areas of concern:

- The surveillance of wildlife to identify potential outbreaks - usually only dead or injured wild birds are brought to the attention of volunteer wildlife groups and the DEC, and
- The cooperative investigation of potential disease outbreaks in wildlife where the effect on production animals is unknown - the role of DPI in these cases is currently being evaluated.

DEC will continue to work with other agencies to resolve these and any other identified issues in order to achieve an effective whole-of-government response plan for potential animal health emergencies.