

Horse Alert Victoria

An operational plan
for the management of horse disease
emergencies in Victoria

**Version 1
October 2002**

Quick Action Guide

Horse Alert Victoria has been developed to guide the Government and horse industry of Victoria to prevent, prepare for, recognise and respond to a disease emergency in horses.

Success in managing a horse disease emergency will depend, in the first instance, on people being aware of the threats, recognising that there is an unusual problem and knowing how to have suspect cases investigated. In an emergency, speedy action will be needed to stop movements of horses, people and vehicles and initiate vaccination, insect control or other treatments.

Horse Alert outlines the actions that are required in three parts:

- **Part 1 provides guidance on recognising and responding to an emergency animal disease.**
- **Part 2 gives details of how governments and industry organisations interact in the management of a disease emergency.**
- **Part 3 covers matters on related threats, prevention of disease, care of horses and on communication strategies within the Victorian horse industry.**

This plan should be read in its entirety as it provides a very useful guide for prevention of emergency animal diseases and to the response arrangements.

If you suspect that you might have an emergency animal disease,

DO NOT DELAY ACTION

- ⇒ **Implement ‘What action should I take right away’ below.**
(Section 3.2 of *Horse Alert*).
- ⇒ **Call your vet.**
- ⇒ **If you can’t get your own vet, call an industry vet or a government veterinary officer.**
(See Section 3.3 below and see the contact lists in *Horse Alert* Appendix B.)

If a disease is suspected at a TRAINING CENTRE, RACETRACK or HORSE EVENT, it is even more important that you

DO NOT DELAY ACTION.

- ⇒ **Implement Section 4.2 below.**
- ⇒ **Obtain a copy of the contingency plan that has been developed under *Horse Alert* by your horse industry organisation.**

What action should I take right away?

(Section 3.2)

No matter what the signs are or what the disease might be, the first step is to assume that a disease is contagious and immediately stop potential spread of infection by reducing direct and indirect contact between sick horses and between other horses and people as much as possible.

So pay attention to:

Isolation

- Isolate sick animal(s) from healthy ones at first signs of sickness.
- Isolate in-contact horses and check temperatures twice each day.
- Prevent the flow or drainage of any contaminated fluids or other materials.

Hygiene

- Handle sick and isolated horses last or have different people handle them.
- Use separate equipment preferably, or at least clean and disinfect it between use.
- Wash hands between handling all horses.
- Wear protective clothing such as overalls when attending to sick animals and take them off for washing before moving on to other tasks.

Standstill

- Stop horses leaving the premises.
- Stop entry of new horses unless they can be completely isolated.

How you manage these steps on your place will depend to some extent on:

- the number of horses you have on the site,
- how many are sick,
- what contact they have with outside horses, and
- what space or facilities you have available for isolation and the layout of your property.

Who can I contact for advice?

(Section 3.3)

Call your vet immediately. Your vet is not only familiar with your horses and your farm or stables but also is aware of the background disease situation in other horses in the area.

Remember

Look. Check. Call your vet.

If you are not in charge of the horses at the time, check with the owner or supervisor first. If you cannot contact the person responsible for the horses and are concerned about the problem, call the vet yourself.

The usual reporting pattern for animal diseases would be:

Horse Owner/Supervisor ⇔ Vet ⇔ District Vet ⇔ Regional Vet ⇔ Chief Vet Officer

but.....

Don't be shy

Skip over a step or three if you can't get your own vet.

The phone numbers for the veterinary officers in the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) are in this manual (see Contact Lists at Appendix B)

Make sure that you do talk to someone who can respond — don't just leave a message.

Important Phone Numbers

Our vet's name is on phone number

Our closest NRE DVO is in on phone number

The NRE SVO is in on phone number

The Victorian CVO's phone number is 03 9217 4246.

If you can't get your vet, Racing Victoria has a Help Line: 03 9258 4774

The 24-hour Emergency Disease Watch Hotline is 1800 675 888.

At a training centre, racetrack or event.

(Section 4.2)

If you suspect that your horse is getting sick,
don't take it to a track or event!

Where large numbers of horses, people and vehicles are gathered for training, a race meeting or other horse event, the site manager or supervisor may have limited control over the horses on the site and probably even less over the people and their vehicles. Such events would include pony club meets, equestrian events, agricultural shows, polo and polocrosse competitions, camp-drafting and endurance rides.

It is likely that several people including the owner and handlers of the horse will know that there is a potential problem before the race or event officials.

Elite equestrian events and endurance events usually have one or more attending veterinarians who are primarily charged with monitoring the fitness and welfare of the competing horses. A sick horse may be detected in this way. Before such events, the health of competing horses is monitored very closely and owners should not bring a horse to an event if they feel it is not going to be competitive.

The great majority of horse events take place over a day or less and do not have a veterinarian in attendance. The owner or person in charge of a horse that becomes sick at the event horse could well remove it from the venue just because it is not going to perform well before anyone realises.

When someone advises organisers that they are taking their horse home because it is off-colour or sick, the possibility that it could be a contagious disease should be considered.

A horse that is off-colour after returning from an event could be incubating a contagious disease.

At events at which horses are not stabled, the risk of spread will be reduced if horses are tied-up well away from other horses so there is little, if any, direct contact.

If, however, an emergency horse disease is detected or suspected on the site, this presents special challenges.

Controls have to be put in place quickly while reassuring the people affected:

Brief the person in charge of the event

At a race meeting this person will be the Chairman of Stewards. It is important that the person in charge fully understands the situation, risks, possible consequences and the action required. The supervising veterinarian at the venue should be included in this briefing.

Stewards at race meetings have wide-ranging powers under the Rules of Racing to control movements of horses and licensed people, including trainers, grooms and jockeys.

Notify the Chief Veterinary Officer of Victoria.

- Immediately report the problem and seek advice about what to do and what to say to people on the site.
- Also seek assistance at the site. Government inspectors have wide powers to take steps to control animal diseases.
- The CVO may also be able to enlist the support of other authorities quickly.
- The CVO's phone number is: 03 9217 4246.

Stop all movements.

As rumours can spread quickly, it is essential that the site manager or designated person in-charge implements a complete standstill as quickly as possible without causing panic.

Secure the entrances to the property in such a manner that does not jeopardise the safety of people or animals.

Immediately announce why this has been done and what action is being taken to clarify the situation.

If a rumour is left to run or an announcement is delayed, there could be a tendency for owners and trainers to want to move horses immediately to avoid being caught in a quarantine situation. This is understandable but could have very adverse effects on the success of subsequent attempts to control the spread of the disease. It may turn a manageable situation into a disastrous national epidemic very quickly.

Record any movements

Record the identities and destination of any people, vehicles and/or animals that do leave the site. Also identify those who have already left. The government veterinarian will need this information to trace movements.

For some emergency diseases, people and vehicles will not spread infection. However, in the early stages, the cause of the problem may not be known and a conservative approach should be taken until the situation is clarified.

Inform people

In an emergency, people will be helped to understand and cooperate with control procedures if they are given accurate information and can discuss issues with informed people.

A statement to people on site should include:

- What disease is suspected.
- What its effects on horses and people might be.
- Why it is important to take control action.
- What action has been taken
- What is being done to investigate the situation and clarify the suspicion.
- What cooperation is required of the people present.
- When is it expected that people, vehicles and/or horses could move away from the site and under what if any conditions.
- That authorities appreciate the concerns of the people affected by these actions.
- What is being done to cater for their needs and concerns (eg holding, feeding and watering horses)
- When further information will be provided.
- Who is the designated person to speak to if necessary.
- Who is the person for the media to contact.

The wide range of issues associated with these statements indicates the complexity of dealing with an infectious horse disease at an event. People may be angry at having their personal arrangements disrupted. They may become uncooperative. Hence, there is a need for planned and rehearsed arrangements in accordance with a detailed contingency plan. Such contingency plans as outlined in Appendix C should include details as to how the requirements listed above for smaller properties can be achieved and should also include:

- A means to control human and horse movements through a (preferably) single entry and exit point that is supervised and through which all approved movements are recorded. Other gates should be locked. There may be a need to establish a disinfection facility at the entry/exit.
- Details of the provision of isolation facilities, food and water and approved waste disposal. These may become major issues for the people involved.
- Disinfection of people, site, equipment and vehicles, and provision of associated supplies.
- How and where to handle sick horses.
- How to undertake euthanasia and carcass disposal.
- A means of always keeping records of movements so that tracing horses is made simple.

- Who is to carry out the duties required, including a single designated media spokesperson.
- Who is to be contacted and how.
- Compliance with Codes of Practice for the welfare of horses (Appendix D).

Such contingency plans should be checked periodically for effectiveness and practicality.
