

15^h August 2023
Agriculture Victoria
Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action
E: SVBSprogram@agriculture.vic.gov.au

KN:MD

RE: Victoria’s Biosecurity Strategy Consultation Draft – July 2023

Animal Care Australia (ACA) is a national incorporated association established to consult with government in advocating for real animal welfare by those who keep, breed and care for animals. Our goal is to promote and encourage high standards in all interactions with the animals in our care.

As a nationally recognised animal welfare organisation most of the reforms outlined within the discussion paper remain outside of our purview, however, we provide the following feedback.

General comment:

Animal Care Australia commends Agriculture Victoria for reviewing agricultural biosecurity via **Victoria’s Biosecurity Strategy**.

Animal Care Australia supports the improvements to current policy and supports the Strategy going forward.

Having said that, Animal Care Australia believes there is one aspect within the Strategy that has been overlooked and could be improved upon. The recent occurrence of the sudden deaths of a number of horses in Victoria’s south has provided us (all) with a real time and real-life scenario to assess Agriculture Victoria’s response to an emergency from start to finish. We note that fortunately, in this instance, there was no contagion to be managed.

Animal Care Australia believes that Agriculture Victoria’s response to the incident was appropriate and in line with current policy and yet the equestrian community sentiment was not at all positive towards Agriculture Victoria, nor its response to the incident.

Animal Care Australia believes this is due to a lack of education of biosecurity terminology, protocols and obligations relating to the equestrian community prior to the incident.

For the purpose of this response, the term ‘equestrian community’ refers to horse owners, predominantly private owners, who are not part of the horse racing industry or larger multiple livestock owners within the commercial farming industry.

All other agricultural industries are accustomed to managing strict biosecurity protocols on their own properties, in transport and at sale yards etc. However, horse owners do not think of themselves as part of agriculture, nor do they see their horses as livestock. Equally it is our contention there is a large proportion who have not been held accountable to meet any biosecurity standards for many years, which contributes to reinforcing these beliefs.

While equestrians **should** already be familiar with PIC numbers and biosecurity measures for their horses, Animal Care Australia can determine that Agriculture Victoria has only been targeting equestrians with education campaigns in the last 2 months. Coincidentally, this followed an announcement that the National Horse Traceability Register will be commenced in Australia based on PIC numbers, initially with a biosecurity focus. It is Animal Care Australia’s contention that until very recently, many horse owners were unaware of what a PIC number was, and more alarmingly, many are still oblivious to their obligations to have one.

Animal Care Australia notes that most Equestrian organisations and clubs operating across Victoria are conscious of and have policies addressing their responsibilities in the biosecurity space. However, that knowledge has not travelled to their members or the general equestrian community, many of whom do not participate in any organised events or activities.

As a result, the sudden horse deaths created widespread panic within the equestrian community, and well beyond Victoria’s borders. The cautious and clinical approach by Agriculture Victoria in reporting on the incident felt woefully inadequate to those in affected areas. While Animal Care Australia acknowledges the reasoning behind a cautious approach is to prevent panic, the opposite unfolded.

Horse owners turned to social media to fill in the gaps in information from official sources, which led to disinformation, misinformation and as a result, more panic. Animal Care Australia saw no authorised officials engaging with the community at this level, and individuals who had a better understanding of the situation, were drowned out by the nonsense.

The equestrian community's lack of understanding of biosecurity and veterinary terminology used in press releases led to further confusion, and created distrust of the information that was publicly released. Veterinarians were relaying their findings primarily in laymen's terms to their worried clients, and press releases from Agriculture Victoria did not reflect the same terms or diagnoses that were reported from vets. From our observations, this is, in part, a scientific literacy issue, and was not due to incorrect information from any parties, but poor communication from authorities to the community, and poor comprehension of the reports by the community.

Agriculture Victoria now has a new hurdle to overcome within equestrian communities in Victoria, to regain that lost trust, and rebuild an acceptance of authority in an emergency situation such as this.

Animal Care Australia feels that the above incident demonstrates that:

1. The backlash towards Agriculture Victoria during the incident response demonstrates that horse owners are unlikely to comply with the instructions of authorities in any future biosecurity incident.
2. Australian horse owners are poorly equipped to comply with the very rudimentary requirements of the first stage of the National Horse Register, and
3. Trust in equine Veterinarians remains very high.

As a result, Animal Care Australia makes the following recommendation:

Agriculture Victoria urgently invests resources into biosecurity education campaigns directly to horse owners and the broader equestrian community. ACA recommends utilising the existing Unit of Competency ACMINF502 Manage equine biosecurity and infection control in full, or at least adapting this Unit of Competency to deliver the following:

- Both in-person and online access and offer a certificate of completion or similar to incentivise attendance by industry professionals and club volunteers. Simply publishing a website FAQ would be inadequate considering recent events.
- The education should be delivered in tandem with reputable equestrian organisations or equine veterinary clinics for in-person workshops, that are free for all horse owners to attend, not just club members.
- Additionally, free online resources in the way of online workshops, or self-paced online courses, based on the Unit of Competency above, for those who cannot attend an in-person course should be made available to all horse owners.

Animal Care Australia feels this is an opportune time to acknowledge the importance of animal welfare and encourage high standards to be met within all biosecurity measures.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback.

Please do not hesitate to make contact if we can assist further.

Kind regards,



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