

2020 Equine Health Association (EHA) Chairman's Report.

As I begin this report and reflect on the past year I wonder where to start! Suffice to say 2020 was always to be a busy year and then along came the Piroplasmosis incursion recognised in May.

The confirmation of *Theileria equi* (*T. equi*) in the country was our first experience of a disease response in partnership with MPI under the Government Industry Agreement GIA we signed in 2015. To recap, when a group of mares were booked to travel to Australia to be bred, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) noticed that one of the group, although resident in NZ for over a year after importation from France via England, had not fulfilled the requirements of the Australian Import Health Standard (IHS) for Piroplasmosis (negative Elisa & IFAT on the same blood) although she had satisfied NZ's IHS (negative Elisa). The consequence was that the required testing to satisfy AQIS produced a positive ELISA & IFAT showing the mare had been infected with *T. equi*. A positive PCR test confirmed the presence of the organism in the mare. The relatively open travel to Australia for horses was immediately closed. At the first joint Governance meeting it was established that a response was required which immediately had industry (EHA) responsible for not only 50% of the decision-making but also 50% of the associated costs minus a 20% transitional discount as a result of our early signing of the GIA deed. The immediate response activity was to ascertain if the disease had spread, while MPI market access worked to regain a means of access for horses to travel to Australia and other countries. This was an urgent priority as there were a number of mares to be flown to Australia before foaling and subsequent service. Pregnant mares, can for welfare reasons only travel up to 300 days in foal and for early-bred mares the final travel date was fast approaching. Adding to the perfect storm Covid-19 meant access to aircraft space was very difficult. The DHL 767 was now the only aircraft available as other airlines normally used would not allow grooms to travel. The DHL daily service would now only take horses on a Friday charter with very limited space also unreliably available on Saturday and Sunday. After much negotiation transport was able to recommence with the requirement for all exported horses to have negative ELISA & IFAT blood test results on the same sample. This increased testing came at significant financial and time cost. (The cost per test is approximately \$600.00 and as the IFAT is only available in Perth or Japan this added three weeks to the usual export process.)

We are grateful to Cambridge Stud whose impeccable records allowed MPI lead Veterinary Disease Investigator Andrew McFadden to quickly establish the risk profile of all horses on the stud's properties. It was with some relief that we relatively quickly established after testing that none of the in contact "high risk" group showed any evidence of exposure to the disease. In the ensuing months all horses from the stud's properties and those who had been on the properties for even a short time were traced and also tested. Although it was always considered unlikely any of these would show exposure to the disease, this was however considered a necessary requirement if NZ was able to argue to the OIE (World Animal Health Organisation) and more importantly our major trading partner and neighbour, Australia, of our re-established *T. equi* disease free status.

Tracing all the contact horses was a major logistic exercise and I would like to express thanks to NZTR and the many equine practitioners who willingly assisted. I also must acknowledge the transport company (IRT) who, in very difficult circumstances, pulled the proverbial rabbit out of the hat in managing to devise an intricate transport arrangement that saw the mare at the centre of the incursion successfully relocated back to France before she reached 300 days of pregnancy. It was with much relief that I watched from across the Manukau Harbour as the aircraft ascended into the air and then distance itself from the country! The pleasing sequel is that she has since foaled successfully and the foal has tested negative to T. equi.

We were very fortunate that the two major transport companies had as an internal policy carried out testing to satisfy the Australian IHS on every other horse that entered the country over the last two years and made those records available. This saved the tracing of many horses and many thousands of in-contacts.

The self-declaration of T. equi disease freedom has just been presented to the OIE and Australia; we await the response from both. T. equi is a blood borne disease and is transmitted between hosts principally by a tick vector. The NZ cattle tick, *Haemaphysalis longicornis*, is New Zealand's only tick and the NZ Import Health Standard has been based on the belief that it is not a competent vector for T. equi, though evidence to confirm this is light. There is laboratory evidence from Japan that our tick can be infected but the next step of transmission to the horse has not yet been demonstrated. Australia do however have a competent tick which forms the basis of their IHS.

The equine industry's contribution to the response and the fact that we received a further 20% discount off our 50% contribution for being an early signatory has meant our share of the cost of the response has been contained, though the wider costs arising from the extra testing, and travel disruption has seen the sector absorb up to NZ\$1M in cost and there is a continual true cost to industry until the free border is re-opened.

My last two reports have highlighted that the establishment of an efficient levy collection system was now a priority initiative for the EHA. The underwrite provided by the NZ Racing Board to satisfy the funding requirement and allow the signing of the GIA in 2015 is no longer appropriate with the restructure and passing of the Racing Act. I also mentioned that a levy would provide a buffer and a means to pay the share of readiness activities and repay the share of any Government loans required arising from exotic disease responses. Little did we know that only a few months later this was to become not a potential risk but a reality. The levy has been based around the import and export of horses and equine germplasm. This was considered equitable as obviously imports create the risk and ease of export is created by the efficiency of our biosecurity. The application for a levy order was submitted to the Minister of Primary Industries (MPI) after the required consultation with our industry partners. This was, since my last report, approved but cooperation with the relevant section of MPI for collection of the border data information was proving to be an issue. This

had the effect of turning a very simple system into a complex bureaucratic nightmare. Early in the piroplasmosis incursion after discussions with the relevant arm of MPI when it was pointed out the restriction on industry to provide their share of funding to the response, the desired cooperation from the other arm of MPI suddenly was not an issue. We are very grateful to Dr Tony Parsons (Equestrian Sport NZ EHA representative) who volunteered to oversee and administrate the levy collection, as I write I have had notification from Tony that the first month of levies have just been invoiced.

I am pleased to report that the genetically modified Equine Influenza (EI) vaccine "Proteq-flu" is now in the country and we have finally cleared every hurdle placed in front of us to allow its use on horses being exported, where there is an importing country requirement for them to be vaccinated for EI. The NZEHA are the registrants of the vaccine and the distributors. The vaccine is stored in Dr. Andrew Grierson's Takanini "Biofax" facility and the EHA have invested in a special computer monitored medical refrigerator to store it. I can report from experience that this computer monitor is very efficient with Andrew, Trish Pearce and I being sent text and email warnings every time there is any variation in the power supply, no matter what time of day or night. Auckland seems to have many of these!

We have over the last 4-5 years worked to modify the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approval conditions and update the ACVM approved Operating Plan (OP). The latest update of the OP having only last month gained MPI Biosecurity approval before being resubmitted to ACVM. The terms of the Bohreinger-Engleheim supply agreement have only relatively recently been agreed and signed after much negotiation involving insurances and the vaccine supply chain has finally produced the product. Andrew Grierson and I recently spoke with representatives of the Waikato and Auckland veterinary practices where most of the vaccine will be used explaining the obligations of the OP. The last doses of the presently used killed vaccine will be used over the next month thus timing has been very precise.

The EHA have put effort into this initiative to allow supplies of the vaccine to be held in New Zealand so that the supply chain will be established and a small reserve will be on hand if an EI incursion were ever to occur. The effectiveness of the vaccine in assisting in the control of an incursion, from epidemiologic studies the EHA have commissioned, is directly related to the speed in which vaccination can be implemented. This vaccine is the one of preference for a number of reasons including speed of onset of immunity and being able to differentiate infected from vaccinated horses (DIVA).

I have mentioned previously that this initiative has the full support of Professor James Gilkerson. Prof Gilkerson is an internationally respected virologist, is Professor of Veterinary Microbiology & Director of the Centre for Equine Infectious Disease at Melbourne University, a Past President of "Australian Equine Veterinarians" and was very involved in an advisory capacity during the Australian EI incursion.

My last report noted that MPI, Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade (MFAT), NZ Trade & Enterprise (NZTE) requested the NZEHA (as New Zealand's mandated

equine representative body with proven equine health and welfare expertise) assist them with their considered important growing relationship with China. It was planned that a Memorandum of Agreement, with a stated objective of enhancing equine health and well-being in China and to build the professional relationships and capabilities of the participants, be signed between the NZEHA and The China Horse Industry Association (CHIA), in the presence of our Deputy Prime Minister and the China equivalent in Beijing. At the last minute this did not take place due to itinerary changes but I did travel on to Hohhot to the CHIA organised “2019 World Horse Culture Forum” where I had been asked to present on the NZ Horse Industry and Horse Culture. This proved to be a very positive experience. The theme was “Horse Culture” and they had drawn speakers from all and unusual parts of the Globe to present not only on their country’s horse culture perspective but also speakers on various breeds. Speakers from Ukraine, Turkmenistan, Germany, Hungary, Spain, Uruguay, Turkey, Iceland, Thailand, Argentina, Uzbekistan, Russia, Lithuania, Portugal, Suriname, Bulgaria, England, France, China and of course New Zealand presented. There was a recurrent theme expressed from CHIA over the days of the Forum. Although they are very proud of their wonderful history and culture with horses spanning 5,000 years, they also acknowledge that of more recent times they have dropped the ball and there was often reference to seeking assistance for a “rejuvenation” of their welfare and veterinary knowledge, which can only be considered a positive. Although any planned CHIA visitation to NZ in 2020 has not been possible, contact has continued with updates on their welfare projects and requests for opinion having been received.

It was noted in my last report that a database for the identification and traceability of our equine population is an essential biosecurity readiness project, and our recent experience certainly supports this. Progress has been slow mainly due to workload but a workshop with MPI and others is planned for the upcoming EHA meeting where it is hoped a practical way forward can be progressed.

Requests for consultation over various equine related matters with MPI Welfare, Biosecurity, Imports, Exports and the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC) are regularly received and actively responded to. The EHA has a very professional relationship with all these bodies.

As I mentioned in my introduction this has been an active but fulfilling year for the EHA with a number projects gaining momentum or coming to fruition. The T. equi incursion did for a period become all consuming and I am again very grateful to the support of our Executive Adviser Dr Trish Pearce and the EHA members who joined Trish and I on GIA Governance.

Considerable input from the whole Committee has led to the successful year and I believe industry partners are very fortunate to have such focused and dedicated individuals representing them. I thank all members of our Committee for the positive attitude they bring to the table and their willingness to take on areas of responsibility,

Ivan Bridge.
Chairman.