



27<sup>th</sup> April, 2009

The Hon Ian Macdonald  
Minister for Primary Industries  
Minister for Energy  
Minister for Mineral Resources  
Minister for State Development  
Level 33, Governor Macquarie Tower  
1 Farrer Place  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Minister

**Re: NSW Veterinary Diagnostic Facilities**

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), NSW Farmers' Association, Australian Society of Veterinary Pathologists (ASVP) and the District Veterinarians Association would like to thank the Minister for meeting with us on Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2009 about our concerns regarding the closure of the regional veterinary laboratories at Orange and Wollongbar. While acknowledging that the Government will not review their decision to close the laboratories we reiterate our opposition to this, as we believe that it is not in the best interest of the biosecurity of New South Wales.

However with the centralisation of diagnostic services at Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute (EMAI) it is important that services are optimised and diagnostic service capacity expanded. We welcome the Minister's invitation to make recommendations as to how this can be best achieved.

The Beale Report recognises that while biosecurity management is a difficult and complex task, it is a sound investment. The report recommends a "seamless biosecurity system" involving business, state, territory and federal governments and the Australian community. The NSW veterinary laboratories are an integral part of this system. To safeguard the Australian livestock industries, our economy and environment we must ensure that these systems do not fail us.

**Human Resources:**

**1. Loss of experienced veterinary pathologists from the system**

Only 1.6 of 6 diagnostic pathology positions are currently being transferred from Orange and Wollongbar to EMAI. This decreases existing capacity by 30% amongst these pathologists.

Recommendations:

- The government should recognise the great value of the Australian experience of these pathologists by increased effort to encourage the displaced pathologists to take up positions at EMAI, by paying for relocation plus generous subsidies to become established at EMAI.
- The government needs to assure that 6 additional diagnostic pathologist positions are filled at EMAI to maintain veterinary laboratory diagnostic capacity in NSW.
- Since the lab closures have resulted in the loss to NSW of the only expert tick fever pathologist, filling this gap in diagnostic ability is crucial.

## 2. Need to train new veterinary pathologists

We applaud the government's increased commitment to pathologist training to "American board certified" specialist level. However major impediments to training these new pathologists include caseload, structured training in all major species, financial support for sitting examinations overseas, and career path issues such as staff promotion, salary and retention.

### (i) CASELOAD

Current diagnostic caseload at EMAI is inadequate for training pathologists to specialist "board certified" level.

The only way that inexperienced enthusiastic pathologists will become expert is by looking at many cases – both common and uncommon. To do this, submissions need to be bolstered from a wide range of diseases in a wide range of species.

There are impediments to the submission of common disease conditions from commercial herds and flocks. The charging system, distance, courier costs and complex submission policies all lead to a reduction of caseload and a skewing towards high value individual animals and narrow investigations. A return to broader and more regular investigations is needed for both training and disease surveillance reasons.

At present there is a huge disincentive for experienced veterinarian practitioners and District Veterinarians to submit common cases as well as less common because of the laboratory fee cost structure. District Veterinarians would only submit samples from about 10% of the cases they see due to cost constraints. At present each District Veterinarian has a yearly surveillance account of \$3000 before the new authority pays or the landholder. This equates to only about 20 – 25 submissions per year. This is no way to train new pathologists.

**A commitment to increased, broad based caseload at EMAI is essential for the above reasons. In addition World Trade Organisation requirements for the certification of freedom from certain disease require that a statistically significant number of samples be examined.**

### Recommendations:

- To improve the number of submissions and the variety of submissions to turn new pathologists into experienced pathologists the government needs to increase the District Veterinarians' yearly surveillance figure to at least \$6,000 - \$7,500 p.a. before the desired outcomes will be reached.
- The government should consider removing the costs associated with disease investigations in core farm animal species as this has been show to diminish and distort caseload and confuse stakeholders. In particular free mortality investigation for production animals needs to be re-introduced. We believe that the amount presently recovered is trivial.
- Wildlife surveillance needs to be included in disease investigations e.g. Hendra virus monitoring.

## (ii) IMPROVED CONDITIONS FOR DIAGNOSTIC STAFF

Current salary and promotion policies within NSW DPI result in diagnostic pathologists being graded and paid at inferior levels to their research scientist peers.

### Recommendations:

- A review of recognition and retention practices for diagnostic pathologists is needed.
- Detailed recommendations to improve training and staff retention could be provided by the ASVP.

## (iii) SUCCESSION PLANNING

Succession planning appears to be inadequate in many of the diagnostic disciplines in veterinary laboratories such as bacteriology, biochemistry and parasitology.

### Recommendations:

- The NSW government should support the Australian Animal Disease Diagnosis Training Initiative proposed by Animal Health Australia.
- Pathologists specialising in specific species should be identified, trained and their details advertised throughout the state. In particular pathologists to specialise in fish diseases need to be identified.

## **Loss of regional links and perspective**

Links with regions are essential to maintaining expertise in specialised areas of diagnostic expertise in regional diseases such as tick fevers and Hendra virus. These diseases are not seen in the current EMAI case load – so no expertise exists at EMAI.

### Recommendations:

- Specific EMAI pathologists should be assigned to the different NSW regions. This would involve the pathologists going to regional animal health meetings on a regular basis, presenting on disease issues in the region – maybe a day presentation in a major centre a couple of times a year. These pathologists need to meet the District Veterinarian and private practitioners in their region and build up a rapport.
- EMAI should have a 2 day workshop annually for all livestock industry vets to also build relationship and communication networks.
- Pathologists at EMAI should be appointed to lead gross pathology training of District Veterinarians and private veterinary practitioners in each region. The aim (in the absence of a nearby laboratory) is to increase the willingness of field veterinarians to do necropsy examinations, improve selection and submission of samples and develop a close relationship with staff at EMAI.
- In recognition of the absence of a local laboratory, NSW DPI should consider offering short training courses to private veterinary practitioners and District Veterinarians leading to the award of a Certificate in Gross Pathology. Such a scheme is operating with success in Victoria. It raises the profile of the DPI and delivers outcomes described in the point above.

- Detailed recommendations for development of links between EMAI and the regions of NSW based on successful initiatives in other states and overseas can be supplied by the ASVP
- Regional links should be boosted to improve training and expertise in areas of current diagnostic deficiency at EMAI such as fish, poultry, camelids, deer and wildlife.

### **Increased cost and delay of getting submissions to EMAI**

The present courier system used by EMAI needs to be upgraded. Private laboratories (such as Idexx and Symbion) have effective contracts with couriers; the laboratories supply the veterinarians with containers and “Lab mailers” to place the specimens in. They also have weekend pickups.

#### Recommendations:

- EMAI to develop relationships with courier companies to give government and private practitioners the best and quickest access to EMAI from anywhere in the state, 7 days a week.
- This needs to be done by clerical staff at EMAI as a service to NSW animal industries and to improve the number of submissions going to EMAI rather than laboratories interstate. This will not only improve the viability of EMAI and thus deliver better service, but also improve our level of animal disease surveillance around the state and offset the need for regional laboratories.
- Best practice would see the EMAI diagnostic laboratory working as a 7 day a week facility – similar to the private laboratories.
- Smarter ways of communicating through email in regards to laboratory submissions should be encouraged and implemented.

### **Buildings and Equipment**

#### Recommendations:

- The government needs to ensure that the upgrade to the EMAI facility builds capacity and is not merely restoration/refurbishment and replacement of existing buildings.

We would like to take up your offer to examine the EMAI facilities and view the proposed plans. We propose another meeting with you to discuss the above recommendations and that it be held on site at EMAI.

We look forward to working with your department to ensure the best outcomes for this state’s biosecurity, animal health and continued export trade.

Yours sincerely

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On behalf the Australian Veterinary Association, NSW Farmers Association, Australian Society of Veterinary Pathologists and the District Veterinarians Association.