

AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY FOR VETERINARY PATHOLOGY

(incorporated in South Australia)

Website: <http://www.asvp.asn.au/>

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5th March 2009

Dear Sir

The ASVP has approximately 200 members, comprising most of the veterinary pathologists within Australia and New Zealand, in a variety of working environments including the university, private and government sectors.

The Society strongly disagrees with the recent decision by the NSW government to close the regional veterinary laboratories at Wollongbar and Orange.

Our trading partners, to whom approximately AU\$11 billion worth of animal products are sold annually, rely on our assurances of freedom from serious animal diseases. We are in the fortunate position of being a relatively animal disease-free country and consequently have a market advantage over many of our competitors. This advantage is only possible because of the laboratory testing that underpins national disease surveillance. The regional laboratory network is critical to the collection of adequate intelligence to support our claims of freedom from disease.

Livestock disease surveillance in Australia has declined significantly in the last two decades and we believe that with the marked reduction in government veterinary staff, particularly in South Australia and Victoria, we are in grave danger of failing an audit of Australia's surveillance systems conducted by a major trading partner. We draw attention to two of the executive recommendations of the 2003 Frawley Report into Rural Veterinary Services commissioned by the Commonwealth departments of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry and Education Science and Training (emphasis is ours):

"E.3 First, Australia's animal health needs are being met on a day-to-day basis but Australia's animal health system will need to be enhanced to meet more stringent requirements for international trade in the future. The immediate priorities are the establishment of an Australian Veterinary Reserve (AVR) **and the strengthening of surveillance.**"

"E.11 **Australia's capacity for surveillance depends on having skilled people in the field, an accessible and capable diagnostic infrastructure**

- **measures to ensure availability of suitably qualified personnel; and a national plan for laboratory utilisation.**"

We also draw attention to recommendation 58 from the "[One Biosecurity](#)", 2008, report of Beale et al, that "The National Biosecurity Authority should ensure Australia has the laboratory capability and capacity to manage exotic pest and disease incursions of national significance (and) the Authority, **working with the states and territories, should improve the quality and use of state and territory laboratories** to support national biosecurity priorities"

The decision to close regional laboratories weakens rather than strengthens surveillance as recommended by Frawley and Beale and degrades the quality of the NSW state laboratories rather than improving them as recommended by Beale. The national veterinary laboratory plan (NAHLS) as recommended by Frawley is a strategic initiative that has now been agreed upon by all state government and CSIRO labs, private labs and universities. NAHLS requires national commitments to disease surveillance, rapid EAD response, disease investigation, animal disease research and standards - and closure of regional labs will further weaken the national laboratory network and jeopardise its outcomes.

The regional veterinary laboratories of NSW, particularly the Orange laboratory are in areas with some of the highest density of animals in the country and the staff in the laboratories have cultivated local networks for information gathering that play a key role in supporting surveillance activities and exotic disease scanning in the state. Local links between the laboratories and the farming communities are invaluable and knowledge of local disease conditions is irreplaceable. These are intangible factors but are essential to early detection of exotic disease. Early detection is crucial, and regional laboratories are heavily involved in the inevitable high intensity sampling that occurs following detection in order to eradicate exotic and emergency animal diseases. For example, these laboratories played important roles in the recent outbreak of equine influenza .

Regional laboratories are important in detection of endemic diseases also. This was highlighted in the anthrax outbreak in Victoria in 1997, which closely followed the closure of the Victorian regional laboratories. In this, the largest outbreak of anthrax on record, the lack of regional diagnostic capability created major problems with local access to laboratory diagnosis. NSW has yet to be tested in a large scale outbreak of anthrax since the closure of the regional laboratory at Wagga Wagga where there was considerable expertise in diagnosis of this disease. Expertise for anthrax diagnosis now resides in the Orange laboratory.

Veterinary laboratory specialists are a rare commodity and if the staff from Wollongbar and Orange take up positions in the private companion animal sector, a significant proportion of the animal disease diagnostic capacity of the NSW government will disappear with slim prospects of return. The Victorian government, recognising it's mistake of reducing its veterinary diagnostic capability, has recently begun recruiting but has had to appoint trainee laboratory veterinarians because experienced staff were not available. Western Australian and Queensland government laboratories have also had to institute their own training programs because of the lack of qualified applicants and similarly, at the Elizabeth MacArthur Agricultural Institute at Camden, the majority of the specialist staff are still in training. We are concerned about the increase in workload that would be directed to EMAI should the closures proceed.

Now is not the time to withdraw government support for livestock industries remain a critical part of the NSW economy and will be a critical part of it's recovery. We understand the difficulties in managing government budgets in the current economic conditions but weakening our national capacity for disease detection in this manner may prove to be a false economy. We urge the government to reconsider it's decision and hope that our fragile disease detection systems are not tested in the interim.

Yours sincerely

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