

Sunday 17 July 2011

Hendra virus causes fourth horse death on NSW north coast

The NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) has confirmed Hendra virus as the cause of a fourth horse death on the NSW North Coast, this time at a property near Lismore.

“One property has been placed in quarantine and the dead horse has been buried,” NSW Chief Veterinary Officer Dr Ian Roth said.

“There is one other horse on the quarantined property which is currently showing no signs of illness.”

Dr Roth said the horse was reported as dying suddenly in the paddock on Thursday and a local Livestock Health and Pest Authority (LHPA) veterinarian took a blood sample from the horse on Thursday evening.

“The sample was sent to DPI’s Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute for laboratory analysis and results confirmed the Hendra virus last night,” Dr Roth said.

“Horse movements on and off the property are being checked by veterinary staff.”

The Lismore area property was the third in NSW affected by Hendra virus after properties at Wollongbar and Macksville were quarantined earlier in the month.

In NSW there are now four horse deaths to Hendra virus – two on one property near Wollongbar and single horse deaths on properties near Macksville and Lismore.

Dr Roth said there were no links to the Wollongbar or Macksville properties or the recent Hendra outbreaks in Queensland.

“Once again the horse had been in a paddock containing a fig tree, so it is likely that flying foxes were the source of infection,” he said.

“Hendra virus can spread from flying foxes to horses and, rarely, from horses to people.”

Mr Roth said Hendra virus can cause a range of clinical signs in horses.

“Hendra should be considered in horses where there is acute onset of fever and rapid progression to death associated with either respiratory or nervous signs.

“If you suspect your horse has Hendra virus keep away from the horse and call your private veterinarian immediately.

“The vet will notify the local Livestock Health and Pest Authority or an inspector with DPI if they consider the case highly suspect for Hendra.

“If they are unavailable, and the illness is progressing rapidly, call the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline on 1800 675 888.

“We encourage all horse owners to be vigilant and monitor the health of the horse – and only take a healthy horse off their property.

“The best solution at the moment is to try to keep horses protected from flying foxes.”

Dr Roth said there has been no evidence of human-to-human or flying fox-to-human spread of Hendra virus.

NSW DPI advises horse owners to take precautions in areas with flying foxes - to reduce the risk of their horses becoming infected:

- Place feed and water containers under cover.
- Do not place feed and water under trees, especially trees with fruit.
- Do not use feed that could attract flying foxes, such as apples, carrots, or molasses.
- If possible, remove horses from paddocks where flowering trees have temporarily attracted flying foxes.
- If removing horses is not possible, take horses out during times of peak flying fox activity, usually at dusk and during the night.

More information on Hendra virus is available on website www.agriculture.nsw.gov.au/info/hendra

NSW Health advises people to always take the following steps to reduce the risk of becoming infected with Hendra virus:

- Cover any cuts or abrasions on exposed skin before handling horses and wash your hands well with soap and water, especially after handling your horse's mouth or nose (eg fitting or removing a bridle) and before eating, smoking or touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Don't kiss horses on the muzzle (especially not if the horse is sick).
- Use personal protective equipment to protect yourself from the body fluids of horses.

NSW Health Hendra virus Factsheet can be on the NSW Health website:

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets/infectious/hendra.html>

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