

Subject: Wildlife Health Australia Quarterly Update - March 2015

Date: Wednesday, 18 March 2015 10:00:16 am Australian Eastern Daylight Time

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**Wildlife Health
Australia**

Wildlife Health Australia is the peak body for wildlife health in Australia.

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New Chair Mark Schipp



The new Chair of Wildlife Health Australia, Mark Schipp (pictured), is Australia's Chief Veterinary Officer. *Quarterly Update* caught up with Mark recently and asked him about his views on the strengths and challenges for WHA, and learnt about his career, and experiences with wildlife.

Mark described WHA's greatest strength as its ability to engage a large and varied group of stakeholders.

“Some of these stakeholders may not normally interact with government, but nonetheless may have valuable information about wildlife health, and can participate in discussions on wildlife health issues through WHA,” he said.

“WHA also has a strong One Health focus, and collects and disseminates information of relevance to animal health, public health and environmental management. They bring together groups and agencies working in these fields, both at different levels of government and in the private sector, and can facilitate improved information flow,” he said.

Mark said a future challenge for WHA is to continue to grow and develop surveillance capacity, particularly in a changing climate of disease emergence, international translocation of pathogens through travel or trade, and new developments in industries including agriculture and tourism.

As the new Chair of the WHA management committee, Mark said he is looking forward to leading discussion about the future priorities and strategic direction for WHA.

“This is an exciting time for the organisation, now well established as an independent body, but it is now time to think about what the future may bring, and how to build the best possible wildlife disease surveillance system for Australia for the future. I am sure my colleagues on the management committee are ready to begin these discussions, and each will bring a unique set of experiences and expertise to the table,” he said.

Prior to joining the federal Department of Agriculture Mark worked as a District Veterinary Officer with the Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia.

“In that role I was sometimes asked to investigate

wildlife health issues. For example I once had the opportunity to conduct a post-mortem examination of a beached juvenile whale,” he said.

“When I joined the department I worked in the field of export meat inspection which included veterinary inspection and certification of kangaroo and emu meat. As Chief Veterinary Officer I am often called upon by members of the public, politicians and overseas trading partners to comment upon wildlife disease events in Australia, so I very much value the advice and support I receive from Wildlife Health Australia.

“Given the continued emergence of infectious diseases originating in wildlife and the ongoing decline in wildlife diversity there is keen interest in what we can do to preserve Australia’s unique fauna and be prepared for any zoonotic diseases,” he concluded.

Read the profiles of Mark and the rest of the WHA management committee [here](#).

Wildlife health reports

Investigation into unusual skins lesions in Australian snubfin dolphins, and possums presenting with neurological signs, are two events reported in the latest Animal Health Surveillance Quarterly.

Each quarter Wildlife Health Australia pulls together a summary report based on wildlife disease events captured through our surveillance programs and entered into our national database (eWHIS). Wildlife disease events are reported on a regular basis by state and territory WHA coordinators, zoo and sentinel clinic veterinarians, researchers and other WHA members.

The report is published in Animal Health Surveillance Quarterly, which is produced by Animal Health Australia as part of Australia's National Animal Health Information System.

[Our report](#) includes:

- Wild bird mortality events
- An update on the use of the pesticide fenthion in Australia
- Avian influenza surveillance in wild birds
- Wobbly possum syndrome
- A kangaroo mass mortality due to parasitism
- Australian snubfin dolphin with lobomycosis-like disease
- Australian bat lyssavirus testing of bats

In collaboration with our Bat Health Focus Group, WHA also publishes a regular summary of Australian bat lyssavirus (ABLV) testing of bats in Australia. A new issue of ABLV BAT STATS (December 2014) has just been published and can be downloaded from the [Bat Health Focus Group page](#).

Antimicrobial resistance tackled

Wildlife and feral animals can act as reservoirs for antimicrobial resistance, and should be considered in the development of a national surveillance and research program.

This was the message Wildlife Health Australia delivered in a written submission to the Australian Antimicrobial Resistance Prevention and Containment Steering Group last year.

WHA's Rupert Woods said that the misuse of antibiotics in human and animal health has led to a huge increase in the numbers of strains of bacteria that are resistant to treatment with antibiotics.

He said that transfer of resistant bacteria between humans, production animals and free-ranging (native and feral) animals was known to occur, but the dynamics of this process and the magnitude of the risk to public health and agriculture are poorly understood. He said further research in this area is needed.

WHA's submission highlighted a number of recent wildlife cases. For example, free-ranging wallabies living in a remote location and without previous exposure to antibiotics have been found with multi-drug resistant *Staphylococci* bacteria.

Rupert also participated in a working group meeting on the issue in Canberra last year that considered how surveillance for antimicrobial resistant bacteria might be carried out in the livestock industries.

Protecting our northern borders



Wildlife Health Australia's Tiggy Grillo (pictured) returned from a Cairns meeting late last year deeply impressed by the work of those charged with protecting Australia's northern borders from the risks of exotic pests, weeds and diseases.

The Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) was established in 1989 and is part of the Federal

Department of Agriculture.

Tiggy said it was great to be invited to the NAQS annual strategic planning and review meeting, which was attended by NAQS veterinarians, plant pathologists, botanists and entomologists.

“The NAQS team are a dedicated bunch. They regularly hang out of helicopters and work in incredibly challenging remote areas, and have a rich knowledge of northern Australia,” she said.

Tiggy said there was good collaboration between the NAQS veterinarians and WHA through the National Avian Influenza Wild Bird (NAIWB) surveillance program, which Tiggy coordinates. Further linkages are also being established between the NAQS veterinarians and WHA coordinators in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, which will strengthen wildlife disease surveillance and communication across northern Australia.

As well as attending the NAQS meeting, Tiggy had the chance to join NAQS vet, Chris Rodwell, collecting wild bird faecal samples in the Atherton Tablelands for the NAIWB surveillance program.

“We swabbed 275 faecal samples from plumed whistling ducks and magpie geese at three different sites. It was great to get out into the field and the trip really reminded me of the challenges of field work,” she said.

No highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses were identified. Of the 275 faecal samples collected, one sample was positive for avian influenza via PCR and was later subtyped as a low pathogenic H2N7.

Tiggy explained the NAIWB surveillance program contributes to a better understanding of avian influenza ecology and epidemiology in Australia, to support industry and human health risk management.

She noted that wild bird avian influenza surveillance provides the main source of information on avian

influenza viruses in Australia. Given Australia's geographic and ecological isolation, these viruses assist in ongoing diagnostic assay development for influenza testing in Australia.

You can read more about avian influenza surveillance in the latest Animal Health Surveillance Quarterly [report](#) and visit the WHA website for [further information](#).

WHA input into Senate inquiry

The Senate Environment Biosecurity Inquiry Committee is now preparing its report. Wildlife Health Australia was among the organisations that made a submission.

The inquiry looked at Australia's arrangements to prevent the entry and establishment of invasive species likely to harm our natural environment.

WHA made a written submission and CEO Rupert Woods also spoke with the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications, chaired by Senator Anne Urquhart.

Rupert said the WHA submission emphasised that incursions by diseases of feral animals and wildlife pose a risk to Australia's environment and biosecurity.

"The current situation is that WHA is primarily funded to look at wildlife diseases that could impact on agriculture or trade. There is a need to also fund surveillance and preparedness for exotic wildlife diseases that could threaten our native wildlife species. For example, white nose syndrome in bats, which has decimated bat populations in the US and Canada, and has not yet been found in Australia," he said.

The report is due to be made in May 2015. You can [view submissions](#) received by the committee. WHA's

submission is number 41.

Meeting with Threatened Species Commissioner



Wildlife Health Australia is working to build links with the new Threatened Species Commissioner, Gregory Andrews (pictured).

The role of Threatened Species Commissioner was created by the federal government in July 2014. It brings a national focus to conservation efforts and aims to address the growing number of native flora and fauna in Australia facing extinction.

WHA's Rupert Woods met with Gregory Andrews in Canberra for the first time late last year, and further meetings are planned.

Gregory was briefed on the role of WHA and the importance of wildlife health, and also learnt about the work of the commissioner.

“An area of mutual interest was disease as a key threatening process, and the impact on threatened and endangered species. We spoke about chytrid fungus in frogs, facial tumour disease in Tasmanian devils, and beak and feather disease in orange-bellied

parrots,” said Rupert.

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