

Equine Health Committee 2005 Mid-Year Report

A number of specific disease issues were discussed at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the NIAA Equine Health Committee that was held in early April.

Of particular importance to the equine industry at the time were the technical problems that ensued following official implementation of the c-ELISA for post-entry serologic testing of horses for equine piroplasmiasis. Following additional investigation of the problem at the USDA's National Veterinary Services Laboratory in Ames, the decision was taken by the USDA to re-implement the test effective August 17, 2005, using the commercially available c-ELISA kit. Experience to date would suggest that the c-ELISA is performing satisfactorily without the problem of false-positive reactions encountered when the test was implemented initially in late 2004. The equine industry is satisfied that the technical issues that surrounded initial use of the test appear to have been resolved.

With implementation of the c-ELISA for equine piroplasmiasis, concerns have been raised over how horses imported previously when the complement fixation test was the official post-entry test, are to be handled if they are found to be serologically positive for either of these infections. A broadly representative meeting on equine piroplasmiasis was held in early 2005 to discuss a range of topics relating to this disease. Industry concern has been expressed over the absence of guidelines to help states in which seropositive horses are found, cope with the problem they are faced with. The Infectious Diseases of Horses Committee of the United States Animal Health Association is establishing a special subcommittee to address what has become an increasingly difficult issue.

Among other disease issues of continuing concern has been the reappearance of vesicular stomatitis in the southwest. This year's occurrence has been marked by more widespread distribution of the causal virus, the New Jersey strain of vesicular stomatitis virus, with the majority of cases of clinical disease observed in equids. The USDA-APHIS-VS Centers for Epidemiology and Animal Health have developed an excellent website, with frequent updates on spread of the disease, states' requirements of animal movement and also, current animal health import requirements of various countries.

Renewed interest has been expressed over biosecurity measures to be implemented following the occurrence of contagious equine diseases at racetracks, shows and other equine performance venues. This was prompted by the outbreaks of strangles and later the neurologic form of equine herpesvirus 1 infection at Churchill Downs Racetrack, Louisville, Kentucky and elsewhere in the late spring. This topic was considered at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Infectious Diseases of Horses Committee of the United States Animal Health Association. It has resulted in the formation of a taskforce by the AAEP to develop specific guidelines on how to deal with such outbreaks in the future.

The issue of an enhanced national control program for equine infectious anemia has been the subject of active consideration by members of the USDA, American Horse Council and state animal health officials. At the present time, there does not appear to be adequate industry support to embark upon such a program, notwithstanding the cost-savings from elimination of much unnecessary testing that has been put forward, in part, to justify such an initiative.

It is worth noting that the single recommendation to come forward from the 2005 Equine Health Committee meeting, advocating a national summit meeting of industry and regulatory officials on equine viral arteritis, has served to re-energize efforts to address specific import issues over the importation of equine arteritis virus carrier stallions and infective semen. Representatives of the American Horse Council have met with USDA-APHIS-VS officials and a fresh look is being taken on how to effect some system for screening imported stallions/semen without imposing unnecessary restrictions or expense on the equine industry.

The membership of the Equine Health Committee is electronically circularized on a frequent, sometimes daily basis, with information on equine disease occurrences nationally and if noteworthy, also internationally. These comprise news releases from USAHA, the OIE and ProMED postings. Of those polled, the vast majority of committee members are supportive of continuing this practice.

It is the intention of the committee chair and vice-chair to solicit input from the committee early in the new year on appropriate topics for the 2006 annual meeting of the committee. At this time, there are no indications that the mission of the committee warrants revision.