

Tony Burke MP

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Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry

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Dear Minister Burke,

Please do not allow Equine Influenza to get into Australia and become established!

An article in The Australian on 25 March, 2010, noted that you had "heeded calls from the racing industry to allow voluntary vaccination against EI after failing to win opposition support for the imposition of a compulsory industry levy to pay for any future outbreak. His decision comes despite the advice from veterinarians who argue that vaccinating horses would reduce the chances of detecting an outbreak until it was too late to impose quarantine measures".

I don't want my horse to get sick! Every year I see people getting sick with some form of the 'flu the latest strain was Swine Flu. Some don't get very sick and others get very sick, sometimes people die. The Australian economy loses millions of dollars every year because people get the flu and the same would happen to horses.

The thoroughbred racing industry and the Thoroughbred Breeders Assoc (TBA) argue that overseas countries can live with EI because they vaccinate but they don't have any choice. We do! We don't have to vaccinate our horses every year because we don't have EI in Australia. We don't have to treat our horses for EI and we don't have to pay extra vet bills because of EI. Our horses don't get scratched from races or run poorly because of EI. We don't lose months of training and fitness because our horses get sick with EI just before an event or because it takes months to recover from EI. They also don't tell you that the vaccine doesn't always work. Why should we have to live with a disease that we can keep out or get rid of?

Please Minister Burke, help to make sure EI doesn't get to Australia again and if it does, help to make sure it can be eradicated.

The Callinan Inquiry, after the outbreak in 2007, showed that EI got into Australia because of the slackness of some people at one quarantine station. Mr Callinan made a number of recommendations that will ensure that it will be very unlikely that EI will get back into Australia but if it does it is important that it can be found

as quickly as possible. If we let thoroughbred horses or anyone else with horses vaccinate before EI gets into the country, we won't be able to find it quickly enough to eradicate it.

Of course the NSW thoroughbred racing industry and the (TBA) support vaccination before EI gets here. They made it very clear during the 2007 outbreak that they didn't care about any other horse industry or their horses. Why should they care now? Both groups would love to avoid the time their shuttle stallions or race horses have to spend in quarantine and they both make much more money than the average horse owner so they can afford to pay the extras for vaccination etc. However they are the people who are most likely to import EI. It was one of their VACCINATED shuttle stallions that brought it in last time. This is the group that most puts us all at risk in the first place. They are also the group that largely treat horses as a commodity and would be least affected if EI was allowed to become widespread. Of course they are going to support vaccination as they don't care if the disease becomes widespread.

What you are proposing will ensure that if EI gets through Australia's quarantine barriers again, it will become widespread before it can be detected and will not be able to be eradicated.

You have claimed that you must do this because there is no levy but you haven't given us enough time to consider or develop a levy. ABC radio (April 5) reported that at a meeting of key horse industry groups with Animal Health Australia have agreed in principle that a levy be supported.

The Weekend Australian March 27-28 refers to a secret government report by a panel headed by Roger Beale, that shows that it is much cheaper, 10 times cheaper, to keep EI out and to eradicate if it gets in, rather than living with it. Why hasn't this report been released to all horse owners for their consideration before any decisions are made on what our future options are? It looks to me that you Minister Burke, may be using the lack of a levy as an excuse to do what the thoroughbred industry wants. I hope this isn't true.

I'm a horse owner who recognises that I benefit from not having EI in Australia. I am prepared to look at a levy to help eradicate EI if it gets here again but I also want to be reassured that the Australian government will do everything it possibly can to make sure it doesn't get here again. I also want to be reassured that the major risk creators, the TBA and thoroughbred racing industry, those who are most likely to expose the rest of us to EI, pay the larger portion of the costs to keep it out and to eradicate it.

Please Minister Burke, do not make a unilateral decision on this important issue. Please release the secret report referred to in the Australian so we can all consider the information in it about the various options we might have with EI. Please give us the time we need to develop a levy mechanism.

Yours sincerely,