



13 December 2012

Environment and Communications References Committee
c/- Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Sir or Madam,

Submission to the inquiry into the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia: Australian Wildlife Health Network (AWHN)

Please find attached a submission from the Australian Wildlife Health Network (AWHN – Attachment 1) to the inquiry into the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia regarding wildlife health and Australia's biodiversity.

AWHN members represent most of Australia's government organisations and NGOs with an interest in, and carriage of, issues relating to animals, wildlife and biosecurity in Australia and its territories, including the Australian Antarctic Territory. More than 500 organisations and individuals participate in the Network from around Australia and overseas.

It is important for the Review Panel to be aware that wildlife diseases represent a threat to Australia's biodiversity and that a real need exists to better address the infrastructure, processes and policies required to identify, quantify and address the risks posed to Australia and its biodiversity by diseases with wildlife as part of their ecology.

Impacts of diseases with wildlife as part of their ecology are emerging issues. We need to know what is normal so that we can recognise a new condition, and we need to be able

to rapidly diagnose, assess and manage disease impacts. Building capacity in this area is an insurance policy. The wildlife disease area is still a frontier area of disease control.

The identification of chytridiomycosis, a disease of amphibians causing extinctions around the world and in Australia took 19 years; identification of Tasmanian Devil Facial Tumour took 10 years – because of this disease there is a real threat that Tasmanian Devils may become extinct in the wild in the next 25 years. Psittacine beak and feather disease and chlamydiosis are two other diseases presenting decision making challenges to the good work of the Orange-bellied parrot recovery team and those working with Koalas. We need to be able to understand these conditions, and the risk posed by disease to threatened species more quickly. Rapid and timely access to information and assessment of risk ultimately improves decision making, efficiency and benefit-cost.

We support and encourage review of the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia. However, we feel that more emphasis needs to be placed on health considerations in threatened populations and a focus should be placed on development of sustainable mechanisms to enable Australia to better address the risks posed to its biodiversity by diseases with wildlife as part of their ecology.

Australia's wildlife health information system currently operates on a biosecurity framework. The single most important action that would improve the management of wildlife health issues impacting upon biodiversity and threatened species in Australia would be to bring Environment into this framework.

It is also important that research funding agencies and stakeholders initiate a coordinated research program to provide solutions to these issues and integrate it with other current research to improve conservation.

Finally, we would also like to state our support for the very good work of the Threatened Species Unit and those working with threatened species at SEWPaC. It is amazing how much they manage to achieve with so few resources. Hopefully the inquiry will also recognise their commitment and give consideration to how they can better be supported in delivering the inquiry's outcomes.

We hope that this submission helps you with this important work and would be happy to discuss it further should you require additional information or clarification.

Best Wishes,

Rupert Woods

Manager, AWHN

Submission to the inquiry into the effectiveness of threatened species and ecological communities' protection in Australia: Australian Wildlife Health Network (AWHN)

The importance of wildlife health

- Wildlife health is an emerging issue worldwide.
- The emergence of diseases is increasing with climate change, people and product movements, land use changes.
- The most common source of emerging diseases is wildlife.
- Wildlife health is a critical part of ecosystem health.
- As populations fragment and decrease in size and range, health and disease become more important influences on population dynamics.
- In small populations, disease can cause significant declines and contribute to extinction.
- Prevention of disease outbreaks is a far more cost-effective method than attempting to control outbreaks or eradicate disease. Australia's national early warning, surveillance system for wildlife health needs to include diseases that may impact on biodiversity. If these diseases slipped through the current systems, the social, economic and environmental impacts would be considerable.
- Diseases with wildlife as part of their ecology are extremely difficult to manage unless they are identified and managed quickly. There is a need to invest in monitoring and increasing capacity for rapid response for wildlife diseases that impact upon biodiversity.
- Without a thorough understanding of the disease status of Australia's wildlife, it is very difficult to make good policy and management decisions as the level of risk is difficult to determine.
- Assessment of risk requires diagnostic capability, which is lacking in Australia for many diseases with wildlife as part of their ecology.
- Australia has international obligations with respect to reporting on wildlife health and it is important to ensure that data is available to support this.

The need for Australia's national wildlife health program to include biodiversity

- Wildlife health is of vital interest to a wide range of stakeholders — wildlife health and biodiversity is a nationally important issue.
- There are clear and demonstrated benefits of having biodiversity included in a national wildlife health program.

- Social conscience and animal welfare are increasingly important drivers of policy and decision making in the wildlife area. It is vital that a science-based capability to generate analysis, intelligence and inform decision making in the biodiversity area is developed.
- It is imperative that Australia's national wildlife health program includes biodiversity.
- Cooperative federalism should be advocated: a whole-of-government collaborative one health approach between public and private agencies that involving states/territories and private entities in meaningful and practical ways is critical. Existing structures should be utilised and supported.

Resourcing and commitment

- Better funding is required for wildlife disease management to ensure Australia has the capacity to assess and respond appropriately to disease in listed species. Australia has existing systems and capacity to manage wildlife health and has recognised the need to better address wildlife health issues by alignment within current systems. This capacity and capability cannot, however, be realised without long term commitment to improved coordination, cross jurisdictional integration and funding support.

Discussion

- The Australian Wildlife Health Network (AWHN) framework provides a long term coordinating mechanism and process for identifying and developing an approach to problems in wildlife health. The main issue with wildlife diseases is not that we don't have the capability, or capacity, but more that we are fragmented and our approach ad hoc. More funding is required, however a lot can be done with very little if you are organised, there is a plan and coordination is good. This is what AWHN tries to achieve. The aim is not to take over or do things that others can do better but more to try to ensure that we have a coordinated and logical stepwise approach to identifying, prioritising and addressing problems.
- What AWHN has done within a biosecurity framework is very applicable to the biosecurity space needs. It wouldn't be difficult to try to utilise the framework that has already been built to help address some of the issues that the environment agencies have in the wildlife health area (coordination, information management, data capture and analysis).
- The immediate need is for a better process to identify health issues that impact upon wildlife biodiversity (especially threatened species), assess and prioritise risk, and then develop, decide upon and implement the management options (and determine how we measure success). The biggest priority is currently for those diseases that can impact upon biodiversity that are listed as key threatening processes under the legislation (beak and feather disease, Tasmanian Devil facial tumour disease and chytridiomycosis).

The way forward

Australia's wildlife health information system currently operates on a biosecurity framework. The single most important action that would improve the management of wildlife health issues impacting upon biodiversity and threatened species in Australia would be to bring Environment into this framework.

Research funding agencies and stakeholders need to initiate a coordinated research program to provide solutions to these issues and integrate it with other current research to directly improve conservation, but also provide the underpinning framework required to identify priorities and key research areas for the future.

Better support for wildlife health issues impacting upon biodiversity in Australia's wildlife health system would:

- 1) Improve the effectiveness of the current limited passive surveillance system for wildlife health and increase Australia's capacity for targeted surveillance in listed species.
- 2) Ensure that Australia has excellent ability to promptly investigate major wildlife incidents of concern to biodiversity and mount an effective response.
- 3) Investigate and undertake research into on-going or potential impacts that wildlife disease may have on biodiversity.
- 4) Provide sound information to underpin assessment of risk and decision making in this area of Australia's threatened species arrangements.

Attachment 1 - About the AWHN

The Australian Wildlife Health Network (AWHN - <http://www.wildlifehealth.org.au/>) is an unincorporated, not-for-profit organisation comprising a network of stakeholders across Australia with an interest in wildlife health. The core business activity is collaboration with stakeholders to coordinate wildlife health surveillance systems across Australia into a national database (eWHIS) that can be used to improve decision making, management and policy development to protect Australia's trade, human health, livestock health and biodiversity. It is stressed that the network coordinates information and expertise in a way that is complimentary to existing organisations and does not duplicate their operations.

Funding is primarily from agriculture (Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry - DAFF), with the understanding that, with other funding, the AWHN could also be more directly involved with biodiversity, human health and environmental issues.

Wildlife health intelligence collected through eWHIS is provided to members of AHC and DAFF, Australian Government Departments of Health and Aging (DoHA) and, to a lesser extent, Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (DSEWPaC), on issues of potential national interest, potential emerging issues and significant disease outbreaks in wildlife. Information is provided in line with agreed policy for data security and supports international reporting requirements on animal diseases as required by the World Animal Health Organisation (OIE).

The Network assists in identifying priorities in wildlife health work and assists the states in administering Australia's general wildlife health surveillance system as well as facilitating and coordinating targeted projects.

Representation

The Network is administered under corporate governance principles. There is a two tiered structure. A management committee, chaired by an appointee from Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, provides strategic direction and advice to an operations committee, which oversees the running of the Network. The Manager and staff provide support for the operations and management committees. There is representation on the AWHN governing committees from almost every agency or organisation (both government and NGO) that has a stake or interest in animal and wildlife health issues in Australia. There is no representation from Environment. In addition the Network also comprises more than 500 wildlife health professionals and others from around Australia and the rest of the world who have an interest in diseases with feral animals or wildlife as part of their ecology that may impact on Australia's trade, human health and biodiversity.