

Media release

The fight against feral disease



In a world where people, trade and goods are in constant transit – protecting Australia's borders is vital to safeguarding the nation's biosecurity.

But what about the potential threats that already exist within our borders?

Australia is host to more than 50 invasive animal species, resulting in millions of feral animals roaming the country, providing a free ride for infectious diseases to spread and pose a threat to wildlife, livestock and humans.

Invasive Animals CRC Detection & Prevention coordinator and project leader, Dr Wendy Henderson, is helping to understand these potential risks and develop strategies to reduce the impact of invasive animals. She has just authored a review of disease agents found in feral animals in Australia, a hot topic which will be explored at the first international Global Biosecurity 2010 Conference in Brisbane.

"It is estimated invasive animals cost Australasia more than \$750 million per year in environmental, economic and social damage. Most agricultural sectors suffer significant economic losses through predation of livestock, crop damage, and competition for feed."

But Dr Henderson said feral animal issues are much bigger than the immediate damage we see.

"Feral animals and the infectious diseases they carry, know no boundaries."

"These diseases threaten Australia's biosecurity and the viability of our wildlife and rural industries, and even reach out to affect humans as well."

"Approximately 75 per cent of emerging diseases affecting people have a wildlife source – so the threat to people is real. Recent examples in Australia are Hendra virus (originating from bats) and swine flu."

Dr Henderson said Australia has a significant problem with wild dogs, which are estimated to cost around \$49M a year to agriculture alone.

"Wild dogs are known reservoirs of diseases that affect humans and animals."

"Hydatids (*Echinococcus granulosus*) tapeworm in wild dogs and foxes seriously affects wildlife such as kangaroos and wallabies. Numerous cysts develop in their lungs, reducing their lung capacity so they can't escape predators."

"Wild dogs can have extraordinarily high numbers of hydatid tapeworms – up to 100,000 per dog, making it extremely difficult to stop the disease spreading."

Hydatids disease can also cause serious illness or even death in people, making the encroachment of wild dogs and foxes on urban areas a public health risk.

"Feral animal control covers disease control as well as preventing other impacts such as predation on livestock and environmental damage."

Dr Henderson said in Australia, feral animals typically have few natural predators or fatal diseases.

"As a result, their populations have not naturally diminished and they can get out of check in the absence of effective control measures."

"A lot of control is done by national park rangers, pest control managers and farmers, but more could always be done!"



“It is important for householders to contain their own pets so they don’t become ferals themselves.”

“Keep domestic pets healthy, vaccinated and dewormed, and house them appropriately to avoid any disease agents spreading to or from feral cat and dog populations.”

“Similarly, on-farm it is important to manage stock and working animals appropriately — vaccinate/deworm them, protect them from contact with ferals, and don’t feed infected offal to working dogs.

Dr Henderson said effective feral animal control often needs cooperation of all those responsible for managing land and animals.

“This includes everyone from national park personnel, private land holders to urban dwellers; it’s no good one lot of people controlling animals if ferals can then come back from a neighbouring uncontrolled region.”

Understanding the risks of potential biosecurity issues will form the basis of the Threats and Impacts stream of the Global Biosecurity 2010 Conference to be held in Brisbane from 28 February – 3 March 2010.

The Global Biosecurity 2010 Conference is a partnership event between the CRC for National Plant Biosecurity, Australian Biosecurity CRC for Emerging Infectious Disease and the Invasive Animals CRC.

The Global Biosecurity 2010 Conference is sponsored by: the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC); the Australian Centre of Excellence for Risk Analysis (ACERA); and the Australian Government’s Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS).

Registrations for the conference are now open. Visit www.globalbiosecurity2010.com

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