

FOR INFORMATION

NSDIP Advisory Committee Virtual Meeting Oct 2024

Agenda Item 2.1

Last updated: **11 October 2024**

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WHA REPORT – NSDI PROGRAM FOR WILDLIFE

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the NSDIP Advisory Committee NOTES WHA's 2023-24 report on the NSDI Program for wildlife.

BACKGROUND

2. Wildlife Health Australia (WHA) administers the NSDIP wildlife disease investigation funds on behalf of AHA. NSDIP funds also support a sentinel veterinary clinic surveillance network coordinated by WHA.

DISCUSSION**3. Wildlife disease investigations**

The process for NSDIP wildlife disease investigations is as follows:

- WHA and the state/territory WHA coordinator make a joint decision on whether to provide NSDIP funds for an investigation. WHA determines the veterinary subsidy and considers the laboratory subsidy within the context of the national budget.
- On completion of the investigation, payments are made directly from WHA to the veterinarian and the laboratory.
- Funded investigations are entered into the national wildlife health database (eWHIS) and into the NSDIP project of the NAHIS database by WHA.

Summary of funded investigations

In 2023-24, 14 wildlife disease investigations were approved for funding through the NSDIP. There were more than 10 additional enquiries or applications that did not progress, either because they did not meet the NSDIP criteria, they were approved but could not be completed (e.g. no further cases presented or samples could not be obtained), or the veterinarian did not submit a case report or invoice. Samples were submitted to a combination of government, university and private laboratories. Funded investigations were from WA (4 events), Victoria (4), Tasmania (4), Queensland (1) and SA (1).

Taxonomic group	Number of events	Species
Mammals	9	Koala, brushtail and ringtail possums, western grey kangaroos, quenda, quokkas black flying-foxes
Birds	3	Red-winged parrots, silver gulls, kelp gulls
Reptiles	2	Blotched blue-tongued lizards

Presenting syndrome	Number of events
Weakness/depression/anorexia	4
Nervous signs	3
Respiratory signs	3
Skin lesions	1
Ill-thrift/weight loss	1
Circulatory/Anaemia/Oedema	1
Found dead	1

Examples of funded investigations include:

- Multi-year seasonal mortality of silver gulls
- Several clusters of neurological disease in blue-tongued lizards
- Black flying-fox mortality
- Kangaroos with blindness

Veterinarians have indicated that NSDI Program funds allow investigation of wildlife cases and diagnostic testing that would not otherwise be possible. The program has also improved communication between veterinarians and the state/territory WHA coordinators, particularly for those private veterinarians that are not involved in a WHA surveillance program.

4. Sentinel veterinary clinic surveillance network

WHA continued to manage a wildlife sentinel veterinary clinic surveillance network in 2023-24. Veterinary clinics in the surveillance network are those that have a large or dedicated wildlife caseload, or expand the geographic or species range of the national surveillance system. Ten clinics participated in 2023-24 for the full year, and two additional clinics joined the program on a trial basis in the second half of the year. The two new clinics, from central NT and northern Tasmania, were added to fill geographic gaps that were identified for the program.

The participating sentinel veterinary clinics see a total caseload of over 37,500 free-ranging wildlife cases per year. The clinics contribute wildlife disease information directly to WHA's national wildlife health database (eWHIS) based on national priorities for data capture. Since the sentinel clinic surveillance program was established in 2014, the clinics have contributed over 1,100 disease events involving over 180 different wildlife species into eWHIS, the majority of which would not have been captured into the national information system without the sentinel clinic surveillance network. The coordinators from the sentinel clinics meet quarterly by teleconference along with the zoo and university wildlife disease surveillance program participants to discuss interesting cases, share information and establish contacts.

Veterinarians at the sentinel clinics have indicated that their participation leads to improved disease investigations because: a) participant funding allows additional diagnostic investigation; b) participation in a national surveillance program provides impetus and justification for spending time on wildlife cases that do not bring in income; and c) significant events can be investigated due to access to NSDIP funds through their ongoing relationship with WHA. The program increases engagement and collaboration between sentinel clinic participants and the state/territory government agency in relation to wildlife disease investigations.

A scoping study was conducted to explore the second phase of the Sentinel Clinic Surveillance Program, with the aim of expanding the existing system and engaging more broadly with private veterinary practices that see wildlife cases. WHA worked with a consultant to explore options to integrate these practices into the national system and increase their awareness of WHA and wildlife disease reporting. This included a survey that was distributed through multiple channels (including via the NSDIP

committee), resulting in 141 responses. The next stage is for WHA to consider the outcomes and recommendations and develop a project plan.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5. *Disease investigations*

In 2023-24, the NSDIP budget for wildlife disease investigations was \$11,639. The full budget had been allocated to investigations, however two of the approved applications were not able to proceed as it was not possible to get suitable samples to the laboratory, so the budget ended up underspent by \$774 (6.6%).

The veterinary subsidies for wildlife disease investigations ranged from \$400 to \$600 depending on the level of investigation, and laboratory subsidies ranged from \$0 to \$2,400 with an average for those events with lab subsidies of \$595.

6. *Sentinel clinics*

The 2023-24 NSDIP funds of \$11,639 were utilised for payments to clinics for their participation in the sentinel veterinary clinic surveillance network (\$5,000 per clinic).

CONSULTATION/COMMUNICATION

7. N/A.

NEXT STEPS/ACTIONS

8. N/A.

FEEDBACK

9.

Q1 My organisation's needs and expectations of the NSDIP are being met.				
Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Please explain your answer, including any suggested changes: The NSDIP funds are very valuable for enabling wildlife disease investigations and supporting the sentinel veterinary clinic surveillance network. The delegation to WHA of the administration of the NSDIP wildlife funds allows the program to function efficiently and effectively on a national basis.				

Q2 The National Significant Disease Investigation Program has provided opportunities to private veterinarians for gaining the necessary knowledge and skills to investigate and report on disease events.				
Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Please explain your answer, including any suggested changes: Through the program, private veterinarians interact with the state/territory WHA Coordinator to discuss appropriate diagnostics and submission of samples, which helps increase their knowledge and strengthens relationships between private vets and the WHA Coordinator, which can lead to better investigations and reporting in future.				

Q3	The National Significant Disease Investigation Program has helped to improve the level of notifiable disease investigations through effective engagement with private veterinarians and assisting in funding investigations that may not have progressed otherwise.			
Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Please explain your answer, including any suggested changes: As above				