

Pig and horse owners urged to be alert to JE virus

Monday 28 February 2022

South Australia's Chief Veterinary Officer, Dr Mary Carr, is urging all pig and horse owners to be alert to signs of the rare Japanese Encephalitis virus, and to report any unexplained pig deaths, especially in unborn or newborn piglets.

Japanese Encephalitis (JE) Virus, a member of the flavivirus family, has been found in pigs in various interstate locations in southeast Australia, and the Department of Primary Industries and Regions (PIRSA) is currently undertaking surveillance measures within South Australia to monitor for the disease.

Dr Carr said there are currently no confirmed livestock detections of JE in South Australia, and PIRSA is currently undertaking surveillance measures within South Australia to monitor for the disease.

"South eastern Australia is currently experiencing a La Nina weather pattern, which increases the risk of mosquito borne diseases including flavivirus infection," said Dr Carr.

"The normal lifecycle of JE is between waterbirds and mosquitos, which may then accidentally spill over to pigs and horses.

"Japanese encephalitis virus is not spread directly from pigs to people, and it also cannot spread from pig to pig.

"It's also very important to remember there are no food safety issues associated with eating pork meat or pork products due to this disease. We encourage everyone to support Australian farmers by continuing to buy local pork and pork products.

"We want all pig and horse owners to be really working to control mosquitoes on their properties as much as possible, as that is how this disease spreads.

"Managing JE comes down to three or four key actions: control mosquitoes on your property; minimise your animals' exposure to the risk of being bitten; minimise your own, your staff and your family's exposure to being bitten; and be alert to signs of disease in livestock and report if you suspect anything."

The most common clinical signs in pigs are mummified and stillborn or weak piglets, some with neurological signs. Many cases in horses are asymptomatic, meaning that they can be infected but not show signs of the disease. Neurological signs are similar to other flaviviruses such as West Nile Virus. These may include fever, jaundice, decreased or no appetite, lethargy.

A Chief Veterinary Officer Notice has been issued directly to veterinarians and other key stakeholders.

PIRSA and SA Health are working collaboratively with interstate counterparts to undertake environmental surveillance to understand the implications and risks of human exposure. This is the first time the virus has been detected on mainland Australia.

Dr Carr said farmers and veterinarians should remain vigilant for signs of Japanese Encephalitis and should report any concerns to the Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888.