



Department of
**AGRICULTURE
FISHERIES &
FORESTRY -
AUSTRALIA**



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ANIMAL BIOSECURITY POLICY MEMORANDUM 2001/36

VHS VIRUS FOUND IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIAN PILCHARDS AND MACKEREL—IMPLICATIONS FOR QUARANTINE POLICY

This Animal Biosecurity Policy Memorandum (ABPM) provides advice to stakeholders on the detection of viral haemorrhagic septicaemia virus (VHSV) in Southern Californian pilchards and mackerel, and discusses possible implications for Australia's quarantine policy. Comments are requested by 18 January 2002.

Two short scientific communications recently reported the occurrence of VHSV in American pilchards (*Sardinops sagax*), also known as Pacific sardines, and mackerel (*Scomber japonicus*) caught off the coast of Southern California in early 2001. The virus was detected during surveillance and monitoring, that is no disease event was associated with the finding.

The communications are from internationally recognised fish disease laboratories. The findings are published on the Internet (<http://www.fisheries.org/fhs/Newsletter>) and were presented at a scientific meeting in North America.

Australia imports whole round (ie ungutted) pilchards and mackerel from this region for a variety of uses, including commercial fishing bait, recreational fishing bait and aquaculture feed. VHSV is exotic to Australia and a number of specific quarantine measures are currently in place for the importation of aquatic animal products (other than pilchards and mackerel) to prevent entry of the virus.

The disease

Viral haemorrhagic septicaemia (VHS) is a significant disease in salmon, trout and a range of other fish species – it is often lethal to susceptible fish. VHSV, the causative agent, is a rhabdovirus and is easily spread among cultured and feral or wild fish.

VHS is listed as a notifiable disease by the Office International des Epizooties (OIE). The latest version of the OIE Aquatic Animal Health Code/Manual lists pilchard as a VHSV susceptible species.

The quarantine risk associated with VHSV is related to ambient water temperature and is restricted to periods of low water temperature (agent transmission is not reported to occur above 15°C). As such, Biosecurity Australia does not believe it necessary to take immediate action. However, we are reviewing the relevant finfish import policy in view of the new scientific findings to determine whether it is necessary to modify the current quarantine arrangements. Stakeholders are



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requested to advise Biosecurity Australia by 18 January 2002 of any relevant information that should be considered in this regard.

Current import requirements

Current quarantine conditions for importation of marine fish are based on an import risk analysis conducted in 1999 as a part of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Canadian salmon case. These import conditions distinguish between 'non-specified' and 'specified' species. 'Specified' species are those that pose a significantly higher quarantine risk with regard to identified diseases. The importation of whole round 'specified' species is generally banned, unless the importer can make a compelling case that the use of the product in Australia can be controlled with a high degree of certainty and that this use does not pose an unacceptable risk. For example, herring (*Clupea* spp.) are listed as a 'specified' species because of quarantine concerns, also related to VHSV. Importation of whole round herring has been generally banned except in cases where the importer has convinced the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) that risk management measures can be used to ensure safe end-use of the fish.

Such an arrangement exists for the importation of herring for use as feed/bait. In essence, the arrangement restricts use to specified organisations in those months of the year when water temperature (based on current scientific literature) is too high for VHSV transmission. Auditing of compliance with the requirements is part of the on-going approval process.

Both pilchards and mackerel currently have a 'non-specified' status but an import permit is required if imported in the whole round form. These fish must currently be accompanied by health certification stating: the source of the fish; that the fish are wild-caught (ie not farmed); that the consignment does not contain any other species; that the fish were processed in premises approved by and under the control of the overseas certifying authority; and that the product is free from visible lesions associated with infectious disease.

Import policy considerations

Biosecurity Australia will continue evaluation of the data supporting the recent scientific communications. Because of the need to safeguard Australia's natural environment, commercial fishing stocks and aquaculture industries from VHSV, and for consistency with existing import policy, Biosecurity Australia may be required to list pilchards (*Sardinops sagax*), mackerel (*Scomber japonicus*) and closely related species, as 'specified' species. The importation and use of these species as bait in commercial fishing and aquaculture may need to be considered through similar arrangements as currently used to manage the quarantine risks associated with imported herring (see above). Such a listing would also have an impact on the importation of these species for use as recreational fishing bait.

Biosecurity Australia is aware that various aquaculture and fishing industries are highly dependent on imported pilchards/herring for feed and bait, and that imports are crucial as demand exceeds domestic pilchard catches. A tightening of requirements may disrupt import arrangements from parts of the world where VHSV is known to be present.

You are invited to comment on the above findings. Your response by 18 January 2002 would be appreciated. We will take your comments into consideration in making recommendations to the Executive Manager of Biosecurity Australia on Australia's response to the finding.

I would be grateful if you would pass details of this advice to other interested parties, who should advise Biosecurity Australia if they wish to be included in future communications on this matter.

Confidentiality

Respondents are advised that, subject to the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* and the *Privacy Act 1988*, all submissions received in response to Animal Biosecurity Policy Memoranda will be publicly available and may be listed or referred to in any papers or reports prepared on the subject matter of the Memoranda.

The Commonwealth reserves the right to reveal the identity of a respondent unless a request for anonymity accompanies the submission. Where a request for anonymity does not accompany the submission the respondent will be taken to have consented to the disclosure of his or her identity for the purposes of Information Privacy Principle 11 of the *Privacy Act*.

The contents of the submission will not be treated as confidential unless they are marked 'confidential' and they are capable of being classified as such in accordance with the *Freedom of Information Act*.

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