

Origin of the National Equine Health Plan and the Equine Disease Communication Center

Letter to all horse organizations and owners

In 2010 the USDA approached the American Horse Council (AHC) to help the industry prepare an industry response to disease outbreaks. The American Horse Council (AHC) working with the USDA initiated a draft of a National Equine Health Plan (NEHP). Part of the plan addressed the need for communications within the industry to help in identifying and preventing diseases. At that time the plan remained a draft until April of 2011 when a large cutting horse show in Ogden, Utah had horses exposed to Herpesvirus-1 (EHV-1), which caused the neurologic form of the disease. Overall 2000 horses were potentially exposed with 90 testing positive. Twenty-eight cases were confirmed from exposure at the show while another 28 were confirmed from secondary exposure in other locations.

Quick work by veterinarians and state animal health officials (SAHO) helped to keep the disease from spreading further, but because there was no effective communication system, horses left the show grounds without any knowledge of the problem or due to owner fear for their horses safety once they learned of the problem by social media. As a result there were 242 exposed premises in 19 states with 17 cases confirmed in California alone. Of 520 registered shows and events that year in California there were 142 canceled. Thirteen horses died or were euthanized with others having an incomplete recovery. During the outbreak the rumors via Facebook and Twitter caused panic and shut down horse movement and events across the nation although most were not actually threatened by the disease. It is hard to estimate the economic impact from this outbreak, but suffice it to say there was a multimillion-dollar impact from loss of horses, horse use and shut down of industry activity.

Following the 2011 outbreak of the EHM in Utah, I chaired an American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) task force to work on the communication module and biosecurity aspects of the NEHP. The following were the recommendations from the task force.

- Have all states be consistent by adopting same list of reportable diseases.
- Establish an Equine Disease Communications Center (EDCC).
- Obtain industry funding that would be ongoing for on-call personnel to staff the EDCC seven days a week.
- Develop a triage system for communications and methods of reporting contagious diseases.
- Create an equine disease website for posting of information collected and triaged at the EDCC.
- Collect information about equine contagious disease and biosecurity with recommendations to be placed on the EDCC website and for other equine organizations.
- Create links to state and USDA-APHIS-Veterinary Services websites to help with communications
 - Develop a system at the EDCC to advise all state animal health officials and horse organizations of confirmed infectious disease outbreaks.
 - Develop a protocol and identify spokespersons for information release to the media.

The AAEP Board of Directors and the trustees of the AHC accepted these recommendations. Subsequently meetings with state and federal animal health officials and the leaders of numerous associations, including AQHA, the Jockey Club, the Arabian horse Association and United State Equestrian Federation, developed a plan for communications and how the EDCC would be set up to

Invent the Future

respond to disease outbreaks as well as serving as a reliable resource about diseases, biosecurity, and disease prevention.

To this end the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) has committed their call center to act as the hub for receiving and communication information to the EDCC. In addition USEF has created and is hosting the EDCC website. This commitment is a significant contribution of time and resources for the EDCC. AAEP has donated an office for the EDCC communication specialist and will administrate donations and use of funds through the AAEP Foundation (donations are tax deductible). Furthermore the EDCC will have access to subject matter experts from AAEP member clinicians and scientists. This contribution is significant commitment of time and resources to make the EDCC functional and reliable.

State animal health officials (SAHO) are aware of the challenges in communications within their state and nationally. State departments of agriculture do not ordinarily provide information to other states and although they may share information, the list of reportable diseases is not the same in all states. A disease occurrence is frequently not shared with bordering states, as there is no protocol or directive to do so. Because the horse industry relies on horse movement, lack of information sharing creates a significant risk for disease spread during an outbreak, even from diseases in individual horses.

In response to this need for better communications SAHO working with AHC and AAEP established protocols for communications with EDCC that will allow rapid release of critical information about disease outbreaks so the industry does not have to rely on the media outlets or social media to get the information. The United States Animal Health Association (USAHA), which is the national association for state veterinarians from all states, has passed a resolution recommending formation of the EDCC. Similarly USDA has recommended and committed to help the EDCC with a newly organized commodity group for horses and is committed to help with communications and finding resources.

One might ask why the states or the USDA don't set up an equine communication system. Unfortunately because of the laws that regulate state and federal activities, supporting this effort would require state legislatures or congress to make this happen. It is clear in the current environment the horse community needs to take the lead. In doing so the industry will be responsible for EDCC function, which will be evaluated by a steering committee made up from representatives from groups that support the center.

Frequently horse owners can't see how the EDCC will help their horse(s) until they are confronted with spread of a disease that could be fatal, cause disability or close down shows or events. The only way to be ahead of disease spread is to communicate immediately and have information in place and available so everyone can respond. The source has to be reliable and able to respond in real time. Working with SAHO is key to this success.

There is a real cost for establishing a full time and reliable source of information. The EDCC business plan calls for a full-time communication specialist with equine experience and a veterinarian to serve as a consultant. Some communication equipment and service will be necessary. The plan won't be sustainable without this investment, which is a drop in the bucket compared the losses that can occur from a disease outbreak.

I think to put this in perspective, imagine an EHV-1 outbreak at a state or national wide horse event or stakes race. Who would you go to? Where would you find the expertise to help manage communications and provide reliable information? The veterinarians and local SAHO know how to handle the medical aspect of outbreaks, but there is currently no local or national communication system to help with

coordination of real time information needed by horse owners and event managers. SAHO know this and have indicated they need our help. The EDCC has been developed with this type of scenario in mind.

So how would the EDCC help during a local or multistate disease outbreak? The call center at USEF is set to receive calls from SAHO or owners about diseases. If the caller has information about an outbreak, the information would be sent to the EDCC communicator who would immediately confirm the information with SAHO and send out the official information by immediately posting on the EDCC website and with email blasts to all SAHO and horse organizations as well as posting on Facebook. This system has been tested and is capable of real time alerts. Information will be updated as soon as any changes occur. The website will have information about what horse owners can do to protect their horses or whether there is any threat in their location or at future events. Because the EDCC will have a full time communicator and support from subject matter experts from AAEP, information from the EDCC will be up-to-date and reliable. Currently the ability to provide this critical service is not available.

When there are no reports of outbreaks, EDCC will “phish” social media as well as national and international media looking for evidence of diseases or disease transmission with an attempt to locate the source. If information about a disease outbreak is not confirmed, necessary communications will be sent to horse organizations to refute rumors that can cause panic and unnecessarily shut down of horse activities. EDCC will have updated information about biosecurity, vaccination, disease descriptions, contacts for state and federal health officials, and information from supporting organizations. The call center will be available to direct callers to information and to communicate questions to the EDCC if questions that can’t be answered by the call center. The EDCC will communicate directly with SAHO and USDA to provide and receive information about current disease risks.

EHV-1 has been the poster child for how the EDCC will respond to an outbreak, but it is only one of the infectious diseases (such as CEM, Piroplasmiasis, Vesicular Stomatitis, Corona Virus, and Strangles) that can adversely affect the industry. EDCC will be prepared with information about all infectious diseases including foreign diseases.

This letter cannot fully represent the amount of time and effort individuals and organizations have dedicated to make the EDCC a reality. It is a unique opportunity for horse owners and allied industries to work together for the health and welfare of all horses. I hope all organizations and horse owners will make a long-term commitment to help with this enterprise.

Nathaniel A. White II DVM MS DACVS
Professor Emeritus of Equine Surgery



4033 Iron Works Parkway • Lexington, KY 40511
859-233-0147 • Fax: 859-233-1968 • www.aaepfoundation.org

EQUINE DISEASE COMMUNICATION CENTER DONATION FORM

Donor/Contact Name: _____

Business/Organization: _____

Address 1: _____ Address 2: _____

City: _____ State/Province: _____ Postal Code: _____ Country: _____

E-mail: _____ @ _____ Telephone: (____) _____ - _____

Amount of Contribution: \$25 \$50 \$100 \$250 \$500 \$1,000 \$2,500 \$5,000 \$10,000
 \$20,000 \$25,000 Other \$ _____

- Pledge Gift** (*Commitment to at least 3-years of support. Please invoice me annually.*)
 One Time Gift (*3 year commitment paid in full*)

- Enclosed is my check payable to: AAEP Foundation, Inc. (In Memo: EDCC)**
 Please charge my: Visa MasterCard Discover American Express

Card Number: _____ Card Expiration Date: _____ / _____

Card ID Number/CVV Number (3 or 4 digit number, usually on back of card): _____

Name on Card: _____

- Please feel free to recognize my gift publicly** (*including in press releases and on EDCC website*)
 Please keep my gift private

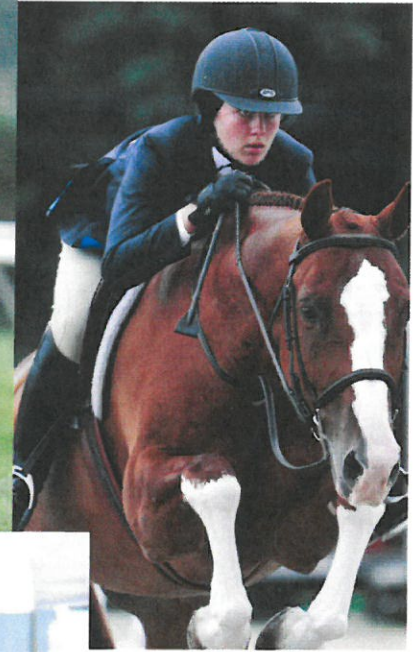
All memorial contributions will be acknowledged by sending a memorial card to the family or individual you mentioned above. For more information about the AAEP Foundation and other giving opportunities, please contact -- Pam Shook, Foundation Programs Coordinator at 859-233-0147, toll free in the U.S. or Canada 800-443-0177 or pshook@aaep.org

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HELP SUPPORT THE EQUINE DISEASE COMMUNICATION CENTER

An Insurance Policy for the U.S. Equine Industry

- **Assure the movement of horses remains unobstructed if an outbreak occurs**
- **Access to Bio-Security Tool-Kits**
- **Accurate and timely updates**



***Why is my pledge
a worthwhile
investment?***

A healthy horse is a healthy industry. The EDCC will help assure the economic well-being of the industry by mitigating millions of dollars in losses should an outbreak occur.

**All pledges towards the EDCC
are tax-deductible through the
AAEP Foundation.**

The horse community is always just one step from a calamity and that calamity is a disease outbreak of such proportion as to widely imperil the health of our horses and threaten the economic viability of our industry. In this environment an infectious disease outbreak can result in federal or state restrictions on horse movement to stop the spread of the disease.

It is time for the industry to be proactive in dealing with disease outbreaks with increased biosecurity, education, and a plan to immediately stop the spread of diseases.

Make donations to the AAEP Foundation designated for the "EDCC," C/O Equine Disease Communication Center, 4075 Iron Works Pkwy, Lexington, KY 40511, or go to www.aaepfoundation.org.

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NATHANIEL A. WHITE II, DVM, MS, DIPL. ACVS

Making a Disease Alert System a Reality

In 2010 the American Horse Council (AHC) and the USDA initiated creation of the National Equine Health Plan to improve the health and welfare of horses in the United States and prevent diseases from causing economic disruption in the equine industry, which can result from quarantines and decreased horse transport due to fear of disease spread. One of the plan's critical parts is development of a communication system capable of alerting all industry members in the event of a disease outbreak. An American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) task force recommended creating the Equine Disease Communication Center (EDCC). Similar to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for human diseases, the EDCC will serve as the official source of information about equine infectious diseases and provide real-time alerts when disease outbreaks such as the neurologic form of herpesvirus infection occur.

What are the EDCC's Goals?

The EDCC will ensure that up-to-date, accurate information about disease outbreaks is accessible to all horse industry members. As part of the National Equine Health Plan, the EDCC will also help educate owners about endemic and foreign animal disease and promote related research.

How Does the EDCC Work?

Organizers have established a communication protocol to coordinate all those who are involved with providing disease outbreak information. Working in cooperation with state animal health officials and the USDA, the EDCC will seek information about current disease outbreaks by reviewing official state and federal reports, along with reports from news media, social media, and veterinary practitioners. In addition, representatives



The EDCC will provide accurate information and real-time alerts when disease outbreaks occur.

at an official call center will process messages and answer questions about current disease alerts. Representatives will send information about possible outbreaks to the EDCC office, where officials can investigate these reports and confirm or label them as rumor. If the EDCC confirms an outbreak, representatives will post data about it on the website immediately and send e-mail messages to all state animal health officials and horse organizations. They will also thwart false rumors of disease outbreak or spread by disseminating accurate information. The Center will post daily updates until each outbreak is contained or deemed no longer a threat.

What is the Benefit of the EDCC?

In response to the 2011 equine herpesvirus outbreak associated with the cutting horse event in Ogden, Utah, which resulted in 425 horses exposed in 19 states, 142 horse shows and events were canceled in California alone. The damage to the horse economy was estimated in the millions of dollars from horse loss and event cancellation. Other outbreaks at shows and equine hospitals have caused similar losses due to fear of disease spread. Rapid dissemination of accurate information on outbreak status and how to stop disease

spread will help free unaffected parts of the industry from the paralysis that can occur when Internet rumors falsely amplify the problem. Even if the EDCC circumvents a small percentage of the inaccurate messages by providing factual information about the cases and risk to unaffected horses, the investment in establishing and maintaining the EDCC will have been worthwhile.

What is the EDCC's Current Status?

Several members of the equine community have volunteered to help make the EDCC a reality. The EDCC call center will be located at the United States Equestrian Federation's headquarters in Lexington, Kentucky. The call center is set up to answer questions and direct messages to the EDCC office at the AAEP, also in Lexington. Necessary personnel include a veterinarian serving as the EDCC administrator to coordinate information from state animal health officials and resulting alerts for current outbreaks and diseases. A communication specialist will coordinate and post the messages about confirmed disease outbreaks.

Funding to support the costs of the office and personnel are needed to bring this plan to fruition. The AHC has appointed a fundraising steering committee seeking donations from all segments of the horse industry. Tax deductible donations will be made to the AAEP Foundation and earmarked specifically for the EDCC operations. The estimated annual cost for a functional EDCC is \$100,000—a small price for a real-time information source that will help improve the health and welfare of horses. 🐾

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nathaniel A. White II, DVM, MS, Dipl. ACVS, is professor emeritus of equine surgery at the Marion duPont Scott Equine Medical Center, in Leesburg, Virginia.

This opinion column is for topics of importance to the horse industry. If there is a topic you want covered, or if you'd like to submit an article for possible inclusion, contact Stephanie L. Church, Editor-in-Chief, The Horse, PO Box 919003, Lexington, KY 40591-9003; schurch@TheHorse.com.

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