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BY: STRATHMORE 3041

VICTORIA.

18th. APRIL '08.

OFFICER-IN-CHARGE,
QUARANTINE + BIOSECURITY REVIEW,
GPO BOX 858,
CANBERRA ACT 2601

DEAR SIR/MADAM:

THE RECENT NEAR-DISASTER CONCERNING THE EQUINE INFLUENZA IN AUSTRALIA SHOULD HAVE ACCENTUATED THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN OUR CURRENTLY HOORSE QUARANTINE SYSTEM TO ENSURE NO SUCH BREAK-OUTS OCCUR IN THE FUTURE.

AS WE NOTED, THE COSTS INCURRED BY THE EQUINE INDUSTRY RESULTED IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS BEING LOST, ESPECIALLY IN THE THROUGHBRED RACING SEGMENT, TOTAL DISLOCATION IN THE INDUSTRY RESULTED WITH RACING, ESPECIALLY IN QUEENSLAND AND NEW SOUTH WALES, WAS LARGELY CURTAILED. WE, IN VICTORIA, SOMEHOW AVOIDED THE VIRUS PROBABLY THROUGH CAREFUL SUPERVISION AND GOOD FORTUNE. BREATHED INOCULATION ALSO ASSISTED ALTHOUGH THIS WAS INTRODUCED TOO LATE AND AFTER MUCH ON-GOING DEBATE.

IT WOULD SEEM, ON INVESTIGATION, THE OUTBREAK RESULTED FROM HORSE ATTENDANTS "SUPERVISING" THE TRANSPORTING OF SHUTTLE STALLIONS TO AUSTRALIAN STUDS IN N.S.W. DISREGARDED THE APPROPRIATE STERILISING PROCEDURE IN THE PROCESS. THE VIRUS SPREAD RAPIDLY AND AUSTRALIA'S BREEDING INDUSTRY STALLED TO ALMOST A GRINDING HALT!

HAVE WE LEARNT FROM THIS EXPERIENCE? I BELIEVE THE FORTHCOMING QUARANTINE REVIEW CAN PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY TO STRENGTHEN PROCEDURES BUT THERE REMAINS CONCERNS ABOUT THE TERMS OF REFERENCE TO BE FOLLOWED AND REPORTED ON. FIRSTLY, IT IS STATED THAT OUR QUARANTINE MUST HAVE "AN APPROPRIATE LEVEL OF PROTECTION (ALOP) OF VERY LOW BUT NOT ZERO RISK."

THE LINE CONTINUES THAT AUSTRALIA CANNOT PURSUE A ZERO RISK POLICY BECAUSE

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THERE WILL INEVITABLY BE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL AND TRADE. THEREFORE, IT IS ARGUED THAT AUSTRALIA HAS TO MANAGE RISK TO AN ACCEPTABLY LOW LEVEL. QUARANTINE POLICIES MUST BE BASED UPON GOOD SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE, BUT WE CANNOT EXPECT OTHER NATIONS TO PURCHASE OUR EXPORTS IF WE DON'T PURCHASE THEIR IMPORTS,

HOWEVER, THE W.T.O. STIPULATES THAT QUARANTINE IS NOT A TRADE ISSUE AND THAT A COUNTRY CAN EXERCISE AS HIGH OR AS LOW A QUARANTINE REGIME AS IT CHOOSES.

SECONDLY, THERE WILL ALWAYS BE A SMALL RISK FROM A TOURIST BRINGING A CONTAMINATED PIECE OF FOOD INTO THE COUNTRY. HOWEVER, WITH SCANNING EQUIPMENT AND SNIFFER DOGS, AIRPORT CUSTOMS ARE AN EFFECTIVE PART OF AUSTRALIA'S QUARANTINE SERVICE. WHAT IS MISLEADING IS TO EQUATE THE RISK OF A CONTAMINATED PIECE OF FOOD FROM ONE TOURIST WITH THE RISK FROM SAY 20,000 TONNES OF UNPROCESSED MEAT, OR FIVE MILLION FRUIT ITEMS, FROM COUNTRIES WITH EXOTIC DISEASES BRING ALLOWED INTO THIS COUNTRY AS PART OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S TRADE POLICY. STATISTICALLY, SUCH AN EQUATION IS FALSE, AUSTRALIA CAN ENSURE A VERY LOW RISK OF EXOTIC PESTS AND DISEASES FROM INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL AS WELL AS HAVING A ZERO RISK PLANT AND ANIMAL IMPORTS POLICY BY BANNING SUCH IMPORTS.

FINALLY, WHILE COMPREHENSIVE SCIENCE IS NEEDED IN FORMULATING QUARANTINE POLICY, OFTEN SCIENCE IS IMPRECISE. WHERE THERE IS CONTRADICTORY OR INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE, OR WHERE THERE IS A POTENTIAL RISK THAT CANNOT BE PROPERLY ASSESSED, THEN AUSTRALIA IS ENTITLED TO APPLY THE "PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE" AND BAN IMPORTS OF PARTICULAR PRODUCTS.

Peter J. McDonald

[PETER J. McDONALD.]