

16 March 2018

Mr Gary Stephenson

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Dear Gary

**Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987 (“LGOIMA”):
Request for Information**

I refer to your email to the Ministry of Primary Industries, dated 16/02/18 requesting information on protocols, actions and education on pet rabbit deaths. Your request has been transferred by MPI to Environment Canterbury and referred to me to reply.

You ask: “what protocols are in place to test pet rabbits that have died from RHDV or suspected RHDV especially those who have been vaccinated with the Cylap vaccine which protects against RHDV1-V351 and is said to protect against RHDV1a-K5 to ensure Cylap is affording the protection stated against RHDV1 a-K5.”

No protocols have been put in place to test pet rabbits by Environment Canterbury. If people suspect their pet rabbit has died from an RHDV strain they can approach their Veterinary Surgeon to have a necropsy done to determine cause of death. Population, serology and reproductive data are collected from feral rabbits (declared pests) across Canterbury annually.

You ask: “what protocols are in place to test kits/babies under the age of 12 weeks who gain immunity from RHDV1 from their mothers that have died from RHOV or suspected RHDV to ensure immunity against RHDV1a-K5 is being passed on from their mothers and also that RHDV2 has not arrived.”

A Veterinary Surgeon can take a sample blood test to determine whether a pet rabbit has immunity to RHDV1. An estimated 10 - 15% of kits born to mothers with immunity will succumb to RHDV1. Inoculation is essential at 10 – 12 weeks to ensure immunity plus regular boosters. Appropriate blood tests would reveal whether RHDV2 was present.

You ask “what protocols are in place to test pet rabbits that have died from RHDV or suspected RHOV in unusual circumstances, vaccinated, large numbers, mixed ages, adults/kits, single-sex only deaths.”

Since before and after the 1997 release of RHDV1 Czech into New Zealand, rabbit abundance has been monitored at long term monitoring sites across the Mackenzie Basin, Central Otago and other rabbit prone areas. The intensity and frequency of monitoring has varied between local authorities and over time.

Population, serology and reproductive data were collated from more than 15,000 rabbits shot across 140 sites over New Zealand between late 1997 and 2017 to assess

the effects of virus on rabbit populations and immunity to RHDV1. Serum samples have also been collected between 2014 and 2017 from more than 880 rabbits at 32 sites across New Zealand and assessed for the RHDV and benign RCV-A1 antibodies. This data will provide background and baseline data for measuring the impact of the new RHDV1 K5 strain.

Three types of release sites are to be established and data collected to monitor the impacts of the RHDV1 K5 release in New Zealand: intensive monitoring release sites; science study sites, and broad scale release sites.

The final number of sites to be monitored is dependent on funding and resources, and willingness and expertise available to local bodies and communities.

What action will be taken if vaccine immunity or mother to kit immunity does not occur as stated?

Prior to registering RHDV1 K5 for use in wild rabbit control in Australia, the NSW Department of Primary Industries undertook a validation study to examine the vaccine for suitability in protecting domestic and production rabbits from RHDV1 K5. This experiment compared the mortality of a small number of vaccinated and unvaccinated rabbits that were subsequently infected with a high dose of RHDV1 K5. All of the rabbits vaccinated with the currently available vaccine survived infection with RHDV1 K5. None of the unvaccinated rabbits survived. This experiment indicates that the currently registered vaccine is likely to protect pet rabbits against RHDV1 K5.

Pet rabbit owners are advised to discuss with their veterinarian how best to take care of their rabbits. Zoetis, the manufacturer of the Cylap® vaccine, has confirmed that additional vaccine supplies have been made available in New Zealand.

What actions will be taken if RHDV2 is found to have arrived, how quickly will a vaccine available from Europe be approved?

RHDV1 K5 is a commercially prepared product that is completely free of RHDV2. If RHDV2 is found to be present in New Zealand through testing it will have arrived through other pathways that not within the control of RHDV1 K5 release programme.

If found to be present, appropriate mitigation measures will be considered by the relevant pest management agencies.

What actions are in place to advise Veterinary Surgeons and owners on what to do if they suspect their pet rabbit has died of RHOV in order to ascertain the strain of RHDV?

Where reasonable and appropriate, pet rabbit owners can ask their local Regional Council to test rabbits using the standard test protocol for the presence of RHDV1 K5.

What education is in place to advise veterinary surgeons of the correct vaccination protocol for the Cylap vaccine?

The agencies that are co-coordinating the RHDV1 K5 release have been in constant contact with New Zealand Veterinary Association and the vaccination protocol remains as per current Cylap label recommendations. NZVA has also been formally notified of the planned release.

Further information about protecting pet rabbits can be found at:

<https://www.landcareresearch.co.nz/science/plants-animals-fungi/animals/vertebrate-pests/biological-control-of-rabbits/pet-rabbit>

You will be aware that if you are not satisfied with this response you are able to refer this matter to the Office of the Ombudsman under s27 (3) of the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987.

Please be advised that we now put LGOIMA responses that are in the public interest onto our website. No personal details of the requester are given, but we do summarise the essence of the request alongside the response.

Should you require any further information or clarification, please do not hesitate to contact Anna Paris in the first instance anna.paris@ecan.govt.nz or 033653828.

Yours sincerely,



Nadeine Dommissé
Chief Operating Officer