

Saving the Tasmanian Devil

The Australian Government will contribute \$2 million over two years to accelerate current research by the Tasmanian Government into the devil facial tumour disease, which has emerged as a serious threat to the Tasmanian devil. One of the most urgent needs is to upgrade capacity to limit the geographical spread of the disease, including the establishment of 'quarantined' populations. These healthy quarantined populations can then be held as 'insurance' in case the disease spreads further, with some animals kept for captive breeding and others introduced back to the wild when conditions are such that disease risk is minimal.

The Australian Government will join with Tasmania to work together in the context of the State's management plan for the disease. The governments will oversee the research effort in partnership with CSIRO and other scientific organisations.

Tasmanian devil facial tumour disease is a fatal cancer characterised by severe facial tumours. The disease was first detected in Tasmania in the mid 1990s. The disease has been identified in areas widely spread across the State, though there is still no evidence of the disease in the State's far north-west and west coast populations. Wildlife biologists estimate that the disease has resulted in the loss of between 30 and 50 per cent of the wild population of Tasmanian devils.

Knowledge of the disease is improving as a result of intensive mapping and monitoring of the wild population and diagnostic research. Both its cause and the means by which it is transmitted are, however, still unknown.

Research priorities are likely to include:

- further mapping of the devil genome;
- investigation of disease transmission;
- toxicological investigation to assess possible causes of the disease; and
- further field research to determine the impact of the disease on wild populations and to determine the effectiveness of field management techniques in suppressing and eradicating the disease in the wild population.