Psittacine Birds Import Risk Review Draft Report – webinar transcript

Postscript: An additional document containing answers to questions that were not able to be answered during the webinar is also being developed and will be posted once complete.

David Pembroke:

Hello, everyone. My name is David Pembroke. And on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, I'd like to welcome you to today's webinar.

David Pembroke:

The purpose of this webinar is to discuss the department's psittacine bird import risk review draft report, and address any questions that you might have. Questions can be asked at any time during today's webinar using the Q&A box at the bottom of your screen. So if you do have a question, please pop it into that Q&A box, and the team will do their best to answer those questions for you today. And in that team today, we have Dr. Murli Baker-Gabb, Dr. Tristan Ingle, and Dr. Sasha Novitski. Welcome team.

David Pembroke:

To kick us off, I'll now pass over to Tristan, who will give a brief introduction and a history of the review. And Tristan is the senior veterinary officer of the avian and bees team. Tristan.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Thanks, David. So what we're planning to cover in this webinar is give a brief introduction of the history of this policy and just some aspects to it, some other factors of general policy, and then we'll have most of the time for questions and answers.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

So, the conditions for the importation of psittacine birds into Australia, they were introduced back in 1989. We had about 5,000 birds imported from approved countries before the conditions were suspended in 1995. We suspended the conditions due to disease concerns, which are primarily about a lack of knowledge about some diseases, and also an absence of suitable laboratory testing for those diseases.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

The Department initiated this review in 2016 in response to ongoing requests from bird owners, hobbyists and zoos, to develop a safe importation pathway to import these birds. In commencing this review, we also noted that there's been a significant improvement in the availability of scientific information for key diseases of these species, and also increased availability of appropriate laboratory tests to enable us to look at the safe importation of these birds.

(Postscript: further discussion about the initiation of the review and stakeholder inputs is provided during the Q & A section lower down).

Dr Tristan Ingle:

One example of that is actually working with the Australian Centre of Disease Preparedness down in Geelong to develop tests for, say, parrot bornavirus and psittacine herpes virus for use onshore.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Now, the Department has undertaken a rigorous scientific review of the risks associated and identified with the import of psittacine birds into Australia of diseases of biosecurity concern. It takes into consideration peer reviewed literature, advice from scientific experts and also operational practicalities.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Just as a brief overview, and this is all in the review itself. The draft review has found that we can manage the risks associated with the importation through a combination of sourcing from approved countries, pre export and post entry quarantining periods, repeated veterinary inspection of the birds and also laboratory testing in those quarantine periods.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

That's all I have to say for the brief intro, I'll now pass over to Dr. Baker-Gabb.

David Pembroke:

Yes. Murli, if you'd give us a bit of an overview of the general policy issues as they relate to the psittacine import risk review draft.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

All right. Thanks, David, happy to. For those listening, if you've read the policy, you'll notice that there's a distinction drawn between household pets and aviary birds. Now, there's a good reason for this. Well, firstly, in this context, a household pet is the sit on your shoulder, live indoors as part of the family kind of bird, a bit like your pet dog or cat. An aviary bird is everything else. So it could be zoos, wildlife parks, their collections, part of conservation breeding programs, or even hobbyists who have a small aviary and half a dozen birds in their backyard. Those are all aviary birds.

(Postscript: further discussion about the exposure risks for birds and other factors considered during the review's risk assessment is provided during the Q & A section lower down).

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

The reason we draw this distinction is the two groups, they actually have quite different levels of biosecurity risk. Obviously, we need to manage biosecurity, but we also need to make sure that the import measures are no more restrictive than necessary.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So, when we went through our risk assessment process, we found that household pets had a different risk profile to all those other birds, those aviary birds. They live indoors without exposure to other birds; it means that we're able to use slightly less restrictive containment measures in quarantine when they arrive here. They still need to go through quarantine, they still need to have all the relevant tests, but the kind of room they're housed in onshore is a little bit simpler. And the nature of the quarantine off shore is a little bit different as well. And that means we can make things a bit easier operationally, and

it's actually going to be a little bit cheaper for people as well. And we have to keep that in mind, as long as it's reasonable from a biosecurity perspective.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So, I'll walk through the import process. I don't want to go into a lot of technical detail now, because we'll easily lose people. What I might do is I'll walk through the process, firstly, from the point where, if we conclude this review, assuming the final review recommends that imports be committed, what we would then do is develop import conditions and publish those on the department's website on a system called BICON. That's stands for the Biosecurity Import Conditions. And if you just Google BICON, you'll probably land at that webpage.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So, from an owner's perspective, or a would-be importer or exporter's perspective, the process from that point on would be to apply for an import permit, and all the conditions you need to meet will be published on that import permit. From time to time, there might be particular idiosyncrasies or individual circumstances that we take into account that mean we make little changes to an individual's import permit. So what appears on your own permit is what you need to do.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

And then you need to look at the conditions. Now I'll talk about these broadly. Again, bear in mind there could be little changes from time to time, depending on individual circumstances, but birds need to be permanently identified. So we're talking about a microchip here, or one of those permanent identification bands on the leg that's slipped on when they're young, and then the bird grows into them so they can't come off.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

There's a pre export quarantine period. It has to be at least 35 days. If there's any concerns, that can be extended, but at least 35 days. And that's under the supervision of an official vet or a vet approved by a competent authority in the country of export. And then there's a whole range of treatments and samples and laboratory tests for diseases of concern. And towards the end of that period, there's a veterinary examination, and every bird obviously needs a clean bill of health or else it can't come, and there's official health certification to attest to all those facts.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

It's not over there, though, because you need to get the bird from the quarantine to Australia. So, there's travel to the airport that has to be overseen by the official vet. There are particular cage requirements set by IATA, that's the International Air Transport Association. There's aircraft cleaning requirements, the flight routes to Australia need to be approved by us. So, if there's nasty disease outbreaks on route in stop-over countries, we keep a track of that kind of thing and make sure it's not going to because a problem or reroute to some other way.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

And the birds have to fly into Melbourne. They need to come to Melbourne, because that's where our quarantine station is, down in Mickleham. And the level of containment we need for these birds, they all have to be in government quarantine at the Mickleham facility.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So, once they arrive into Melbourne, the department will take control. We will take the bird from Melbourne Airport to the Mickleham Quarantine Facility, but the owner's level of involvement is they need to provide suitable cages and perches and feed at least a week prior so that we can provide the right level of care and suitable containment.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

And now the kind of containment varies depending on the category of bird: that's household pet versus the aviary birds. So, the aviary bird's go into quite a high level of containment, biosecurity containment level three, which is, in simple terms, a whole lot of sealed doors, showers, airlocks, pressure control, air flow control, fancy filtration ... It's a pretty flush piece of kit. Household pet birds can go into basically a standard room, although obviously there's a lot of procedural controls around how we would manage them in quarantine to make sure no nasty pest or diseases can escape.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

And that quarantine period's at least 15 days on shore. Again, that can be extended. If there's any concerns or disease outbreaks, then it would be extended. In post entry quarantine, there's a whole lot of again, samples, laboratory tests, and veterinary inspection. And then only after all these processes have been completed, and the results indicate that there's nothing of biosecurity concern, then we release the bird into its owner's possession.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So, we've had a lot of interest from people keen to get new species into the country. So these would be hobbyists or people interested in breeding. And this runs into an issue called the live import list. Or more technically, it's the list of specimens taken to be suitable for live import. But that's a bit of a mouthful, so we just call it the live import list. And this is a whole different piece of legislation. This is not the Biosecurity Act; this is the EPBC Act, or the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So, our team doesn't look after the live import list. We're not the people who do an assessment of a species of parrot and decide whether that species can come into the country or not. We look at the disease risks that a parrot might pose, whatever species it is. So there's a separate team in the department that manages changes to the live import list. And we've been in close consultation with them through this process, because obviously what we do is going to have an impact on them and vice versa, and they tell us that when our process is completed and the risk assessment is finalised, it's very likely that they'll receive a number of applications for new species to go on the live import list, and they'll start considering those applications after our process is complete.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So if anyone does need to get in contact with the area that's doing the live import list assessments, the email is exotic.species@awe.gov.au, but please don't bombard them with emails right now. We need to go through our process and complete our risk assessment, and then they'll be looking at potential changes to the list.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So, whereas we look at diseases and the potential for a new disease to be introduced, they look at invasiveness: the potential for a new species of bird to compete with native birds to displace native birds and so on, the sort of cane toad, rabbit scenario, so that we don't have any kind of repeat of that.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Now, there are several species of psittacine bird that are already on the list, but there's a whole heap more that aren't on the list. So I expect there'll be some applications for changes to that list, before too long. That's probably enough for me for now as an opener.

David Pembroke:

We will certainly come through to it, and I'm sure that there will be plenty of questions off the back of that. But perhaps let's start at the beginning in terms of the actual import and risk review draft. What is the status and when does it take effect? And I might throw that one to you first, Tristan.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Yeah, thanks David. The draft review is still able to be commented on until the 19th of September this month. We encourage everybody to write their comments into that review, every one of them, the entire team will review when we look at finalising the review. And in terms of finalising the review, once we have all the comments, there will be consideration of the comments for a period of time. There may be, and where necessary, continued consultation with, say, wildlife or veterinary experts on questions that stakeholders raise, and once we're happy that we've covered off on all feedback from the review, then the review will be finalised at that point, so at least at some point next year, but when we're satisfied, we can manage the risks properly. And then once it's published, the final review, it will be operationalised, so conditions will be made to then facilitate imports.

(Postscript: due to multiple stakeholder enquiries after the webinar, it should be emphasized that as per this answer, finalisation of the review will be at the earliest 2021. This is our current best estimate, not a timeline to work to. There are many factors outside of our control and it may be longer. All the comments received will need to be reviewed accordingly, potentially including further consultation with external experts. Most importantly, we need to get this correct in order to provide a safe, ongoing pathway for importation. The current draft makes recommendations for this pathway, but that is not a guaranteed outcome for the final review.)

David Pembroke:

Okay. Now, in your opening remarks, you suggested we've been going for a while. Why is it that it's taking so long to get this work done?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Yeah. It has taken a while, and there has been some pre-work done between the time that the conditions were suspended in '95, up until the point where we announced the review in 2016, or commenced the review in 2016. In the intro, I mentioned that some of the disease concerns, such as available literature about diseases was limited, and some of the testing, and it takes a while to address some of those, say, for the testing. To get really good onshore test, we did have to work directly with the Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness to get that done, in conjunction with the import risk.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

And also the improvement in literature over time has greatly improved. And that's not just the published literature, I'm also talking about a thing called grey literature, where it's not necessarily in textbooks, but information that veterinarians and other scientists, they have in their catalogue, but it's not necessarily published, so a form of reputable expert opinion.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Maybe a simple way to think about why it's taken so long is that old saying: There are three kinds of service. You get to pick any two. There's fast, there's cheap, and there's good. And we have to do it well. I mean, this has to be good. Psittacine birds are iconic to Australia. They're really, really important. If you look outside, chances are you're within a couple of hundred metres of a psittacine bird, pretty much anywhere.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

The money side of things is constrained. We don't have an endless budget; we get funded to a certain amount. We have to work within our means. So that leaves fast, but we can't have fast. We've got to work within our means and we have to do it well.

David Pembroke:

Right. And in terms of that grey literature, how do you then stay on top of it to make sure that you're continuing to be relevant and appropriate as it comes to light?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Yeah. Well, these consultation periods with our policies are actually part of that, because we don't just rely on what we know as veterinarians and our own expertise; we actually put it out to industry and to the zoos and the wildlife organisations. For instance, one of those situations will be that there will be wildlife specialists and zoo vets, which have a catalogue of cases they've seen and they've picked up stuff that hasn't necessarily been published or is easy to access in the published literature. But we certainly do want that expertise to feed into the review when we're making our assessments.

David Pembroke:

All right. To the next question why have you only approved some countries and not others? You import pet dogs and cats from many more countries, so why not pet birds too? Tristan, to you.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Yeah. I mean, historically, we did have an approved list in the original policy as we've gone, but as we do our modern policies, not just for psittacines, but for many commodities, we do approve countries based on history of compliant trade, so that's their ability to meet Australia's conditions, our biosecurity risk conditions, and compliance with them, also based on the country's health status. So there are some countries or disease statuses where a certain disease might be endemic, which we require freedom from the country, or part of that country must be free. Otherwise, it's a non-negotiable condition sometimes.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

And that can also be historically, if the disease has been endemic for a while. We also have requirements about surveillance programs for certain diseases, such as avian influenza and Newcastle disease, and requirements for not only their surveillance but control programs.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Just an associated question, what are the eligible countries for household pet and aviary birds?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

The household pet birds that are eligible at present are Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and the United States. Again, that's based on the history of trade we have in avian-related commodities and compliance, so we have good confidence that the recommendations of this review can be complied with, but also their general avian health status and the surveillance and control programs they have in place.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

I'll just mention that those are for pet birds. For aviary birds, those will be decided based on interest from countries, and they will then be assessed, as it's a little bit of a different scenario.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Do you have any indication, or can you provide some ballpark figure for what it would cost to import a pet or an aviary bird? What sort of cost is involved with this?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Oh, I wish I could give you a good answer on this one, but unfortunately it's a bit early. I'll preface by saying we cost recover our operations. What that means is we're not out to make a profit, but we do need to charge enough to offset the cost of providing all the biosecurity services. So the staff at Mickleham, their time has to be cost recovered, the use of their facilities, and then there's some financial wizardry that our department's finance people undertake to determine, for each particular kind of import, what costs would be appropriate to offset all the activity we provide in the background.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So we haven't done that yet, because we haven't yet finalised the import conditions. Once we have those import conditions, they'll be able to do that kind of assessment. I will say, though, the kind of room that the bird goes into is a factor, and for the aviary bird, they'll be in a biosecurity containment level three room. That means you have to hire the entire room, that's all in all out. It's quite a big room. I mean, we can probably keep about 500 small birds like budgies in there, and maybe 40 large birds like macaws in there. It depends on the cage size and so forth as well. But that gives you a bit of an idea.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So for your household pet, you're not going to go through that room. It would be cost prohibitive, but household pets don't need to, because of the different containment level. For an aviary consignment, you're going to have to hire the entire room now, because everything in that room has the same biosecurity health status. If something comes down with an exotic disease, we're not going to let the

other birds out either. So that does make it more expensive. But at this stage, I don't yet know what that's going to cost.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Tristan?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Yeah. And I was just going to add, in terms of costs, we look at the biosecurity risks and the policy. I guess the main thing is that we don't factor in costs when we're looking at these. The assessment is purely biosecurity. And we developed the conditions based directly on the diseases requiring management. And that's it and what's appropriate operationally. So those are the main things we're coming from.

David Pembroke:

Sure. You mentioned the Mickleham Quarantine Facility. What is the capacity of that quarantine facility? For example, how many birds can it hold at any one time, and then how big can aviary bird consignment then be?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

That goes to that issue I touched on a moment ago. For the aviary consignments, you have to hire the entire room out, and that room would hold about 500 small psittacine birds, like budgies and maybe 40 odd big birds, really big ones like macaws. But it does depend on the cage size and all that as well and their housing arrangements.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

There's more than one room though, but the psittacine importers - they're not the only industry wanting to use this, so you'd have to prioritise and take a number and only use the space when it's available. It's not sitting there idle.

David Pembroke:

Okay. All right. To the next question. If anything like the recent avian flu outbreak in Victoria happens while our birds are in quarantine, what would happen to the birds in quarantine?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

I'm not sure in this question whether we're talking about an outbreak of avian flu or some other disease inside the quarantine facility or outside the facility. So the avian flu outbreak at the moment that's in poultry and some turkeys and emus most recently, but it's outside the facility. So it doesn't impact on what's going on inside a high biosecurity containment facility.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

However, if you have an outbreak inside the facility, well, then depending on the nature of the disease that could have quite a significant effect on the birds contained there. You can't have a one size fits all general sweeping statement about what would happen. Certainly birds won't be released while there is any concern that there's an exotic disease or disease of concern going on in the station. One end of the spectrum, we've got destruction and that's unfortunate, but sometimes necessary. But we will try to

come up with measures that can avoid that if that's going to be possible from a biosecurity perspective. So there might be additional testing and extended quarantine period, maybe some treatment. Sometimes re-export can be an option if there's a disease that we can't cure that we don't want to let into the country.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

But then that raises the problem of which other country wants to take a diseased bird back. And it depends on their own health status. So we can't have a one size fits all answer unfortunately. It would be case by case assessment.

David Pembroke:

All right, to the next question. Will the opening up of imports mean there are lots of new species of parrots for example, introduced to Australia. And if there are, won't this be a risk to Australian wildlife and the environment? Murli?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Initially, there won't be any change to the species that are here already because of this thing called the live import list. So for any live animal of any species, any group to be imported first has to appear on the live import list. And before it can be put on the live import list, then our colleagues in the team that do those assessments need to be satisfied that it's not going to become an invasive species, and it's not going to become a new cane toad or a new rabbit. And there are many, many examples of species that have been introduced to the country and have not caused problems. There were a few examples where really terrible decisions were made and bad outcomes are the result, we're all aware of those. So the department's acutely aware of the need to make sure the wrong species are not let into the country. So it certainly won't be open slather free for all.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

There is the potential when additional assessments are done for changes to the live import list, that there might be additional species added. If that happens, then those additional species could be imported. But initially, that's certainly not the case.

David Pembroke:

Right. And to our next question, I want to import a species, not on the live import list, can I do that? Answer?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

The answer is no.

David Pembroke:

No. Okay. Very good. All right. To the next question, there are lots of diseases that don't seem to have been covered in the import conditions. Things like psittacine beak and feather disease. Again, the concern is won't this put Australian birds at risk? Sasha?

Dr Sasha Novitski:

Thank you. So I mean, it's not like these disease haven't been covered. They are in our hazard table. We have looked at it, we have considered them. We just haven't gone further with the risk assessment in detail as with all the diseases. So good example, psittacine beak and feather disease we all know of it. It's a huge concern here. It is endemic in Australia and has been for a very long time.

Dr Sasha Novitski:

In terms of reasons that we haven't gone further with the assessment. One: it is endemic. Two: it's not a notifiable disease here, so it's not an OIE notifiable disease, it's not a notifiable disease in Australia and we don't have any eradication measures for that disease at present. So all of those things have been factored in into the hazard table and which diseases we have gone further with and which ones we haven't. So, that's pretty much it with the beak and feather disease, that's the reason why it hasn't been assessed in more detail further in the review.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Fair enough, Tristan.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

And just to add to that, a similar question we've had is about some zoonotic diseases such as psittacosis and that's also from what Sasha is saying that we do address them where they are exotic or have significant public health risk. But those that we already have here and that aren't subject to official management or eradication program, then we don't retain those. And that's just to do with general trade rules that Australia follows.

David Pembroke:

Very good. Okay. To the next question, my bird always has human company. I'm worried it will fret and maybe get sick in quarantine. Is there anything we can do to prevent this? Murli.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Sure. Now this is a common concern. And we looked into it in some detail earlier on in our processes. Now it's not part of our biosecurity risk assessment, but obviously a policy is only as good as you can implement it. And if we had some stumbling block that meant we couldn't practically import these birds, that would be an issue. So we contacted our counterparts in other significant first world countries that import vast numbers of those birds, and in some instances, hold them in quarantine arrangements for extended periods of time. And the indications are that this is much less of an issue than it's sometimes made out to be. So that's one aspect to the answer.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

The other aspect is the staff at Mickleham, they're professionals. All day, every day this is what they do, care for animals. They really are exceptionally good at this. So whereas you and I may own a dog or a cat, every day, they're caring for hundreds of dogs and cats of all sorts of personalities. And the same goes for every other species that goes through Mickleham.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So, I understand it is a concern for people who are very close to their birds, but in practical terms, I think it's going to turn out to be a bit of a non-event.

David Pembroke:

All right. Good to know. Now this is related to the cost one again, but I'll put you on the spot to see if you can come up with some answer. If you can't, we can take it on notice. Are there indicative cost profiles have been calculated that incorporate, for example, quarantine at the sending country, 15 days, quarantine at the facility in Australia, 15 days, cost of travel at both ends, cost of veterinary tests that are a minimum requirement, including drugs and a timeline for the entire procedure until release to owner? That's fairly complex one.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Look, I'd be guessing at that. I will point out the quarantine in the sending country as longer than 15 days. It's a minimum of 35 days. And I'd rather not just take guesses. There are lots of factors that can be involved.

David Pembroke:

Fair enough. All good. So the next question, can I ask why Aussie species are on the live import list. Tristan?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

As we've covered already, if a species is not on the live import list, you cannot import it into Australia. That does throw up these interesting situations where if you wanted to import a native species that has been overseas for whatever reason, you can't actually do that because it's not on the live import list. For example, you might have a native bird that is from Australia, it's in the wild, it's ubiquitous, it's everywhere, but you cannot import it into Australia.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

There are species that follow the similar process to get them on. But that's why it's situations where perhaps owners have had native species overseas or whether they've been part of other trade and now want to come back into Australia, and that's how native species appear on the live import list.

David Pembroke:

Okay, great. All right. To the next question. What is the veterinary care process at Mickleham if a bird develops illness from a disease of non-biosecurity risk during the quarantine period? Can private vets be involved?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

That depends very much on the circumstances. And if we're talking about a consignment in biosecurity, level three containment, we are not going to let those birds out. Even if it's halfway through and we think they're healthy, the whole point of keeping them in there is that we can't be sure until that process is finished. So the ability to get private vets into those facilities is also very limited. If we're talking about a pet bird, then I'd have to check with the quarantine station and management, whether private vets are able to attend onsite or not. But certainly we do have departmental vets there. And for some species we have private veterinary involvement from time to time.

David Pembroke:

Okay. All right. To our next question. Who appoints the veterinarian to conduct checks in the country of origin to ensure all is completed accurately and honestly?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

So the vet in the country of origin needs to be either an official vet so that's someone in the employment of the government agency themselves, so a bit like my position, or they need to be an approved vet. So that's a private veterinarian working within the legal framework and parameters in the country of export that has been approved by that government agency to conduct certain official tasks on their behalf. So it's the competent authority. We use that term, maybe that's a bit of jargon. Competent authority means the government agency with responsibility and jurisdiction for this particular issue in the country of export.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

In different countries, the agencies have different names. It really depends. Sometimes it's Department of Agriculture, sometimes it's the Department of Rural Industries and conservation and so on and so on. So that's what we mean when we say competent authority. They're the ones who do the approving of vets to undertake those activities.

David Pembroke:

And so that's to my next question actually, I think you've clarified it there. Does the official veterinarian always have to be approved by the competent authority, and is the competent authority a government agency? So you've answered that fairly comprehensively as well.

David Pembroke:

Okay. To the next question, will your work enable import into New Zealand? Do you know of plans to do so assuming that you and New Zealand share your work? Tristan?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Each country is responsible for their own import conditions. So in a direct sense, no. However, I will say that when we conduct these reviews, one source of information is looking at the technical reviews from other countries. So we have for several reviews or we routinely look at the risk assessments that other countries have done, including New Zealand. And my understanding is that they may opt to do that as well. So it might be something that they look at when they conduct or if they conduct, I should say their own assessment. But we do not have any direct influence on that.

David Pembroke:

Okay. So the next question. On what basis, and it returns to this issue of grey literature, on what basis do you decide grey literature is reputable, and why not just rely on peer reviewed literature? Tristan.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Thanks. The reason to include grey literature, and that's just a broad term for expert analysis and opinion that isn't published is because that sometimes the published works, whether it be in journals or in actual textbooks, they might not have a lot to say on certain diseases or certain situations for certain diseases. And when we say grey literature, this also means that we're looking at either scientific expert groups. So say an association overseas about their recommendations for how they run certain things

and or specialists in that work closely with those species. So we look at wildlife specialist or bird specialists when we're doing that.

David Pembroke:

All right. To the next question, were there any disease hazards identified where risk mitigation measures could not reduce risk to an acceptable level? I'll repeat that. Were any disease hazards identified where risk mitigation measures could not reduce risk to an acceptable level? Tristan.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

That is an interesting question. We didn't, although I would say that it feeds into the country approval process, where there are some situations, some disease situations where diseases are endemic or a country has chosen not to put in place control programs for things such as avian influenza which there's no real or immediate way around that. For the other diseases that we looked at in the hazard table and then took on to review we did find ways to manage the import risk with that. But, it does bring up situations where if you have an import, and this is in an operational sense and way down the track, where things don't quite line up, there is a concept called equivalency where we look at alternative measures to manage that in exceptional cases. But there will be some scenarios where there just is no way to manage the risk to an acceptable level.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

The acceptable level is actually legislated. It's under the biosecurity act that we work under, which is very low but not zero. And that's called our appropriate level of protection. If we cannot bring a biosecurity import risk down to that level using a combination of methods such as testing, quarantine periods, and in some cases treatment then that's the case when it would not be able to proceed.

David Pembroke:

All right. Okay. So the next question, and we're back in Mickleham again. Are pet birds kept separately in individual rooms in Mickleham, or in a larger room with other birds like the one you just mentioned for aviary birds?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

No, that'd be kept separately.

David Pembroke:

Kept separately?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Anything in that room with that bird has the same health status. So on a room by room basis, it's all in all out. So for a pet bird or maybe a couple of pet birds, they can occupy a room. It's just a small standard room together. For aviary birds, the equipment involved and the facility is quite a fancy piece of kit. So there are very limited rooms that meet this requirement and you have to hire the entire space out.

David Pembroke:

All right. To the next question. And, just to let me be clear, there are lots of questions that are coming in, and in our allocated time where we do have 20 minutes to go we're hoping to get obviously through to a number of those questions, but if we don't, I know the team have certainly committed to get the best possible answers to you. But we'll see how we go over the next 20 minutes or so as we go through. I'm just now looking for the next question, which is, I have a geriatric bird left in Canada and would like to bring him here. How invasive are the tests and procedures in pre-importation, and when they have arrived or the bird has arrived in Australia?

David Pembroke:

So the question again, I have a geriatric bird left in Canada. Would like to bring him to Australia. How invasive are the tests and procedures in the pre importation phase and those tests and procedures once they arrive in Australia?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

I don't think you'll run into problems in terms of the invasiveness. They will require birds to be physically handled for a full proper veterinary examination. But that's something that most of those birds will have experienced before. And most of their laboratory testing is agent identification, which means they're typically conducted on swabs taken from the bird rather than anything particularly invasive.

David Pembroke:

Tristan?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

No, sorry, I don't have anything further to add.

David Pembroke:

Okay. I do have another question. And this one is, if a country is not approved, could a special application be made for example, with South Africa, or is there no chance of ever being included? Tristan for you.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

As we have discussed, the approval of certain countries is based on their health status, their control programs, our history of compliance with trade. I think it's worthwhile saying that it depends on those. There aren't any countries that it is impossible to import from, but it does depend on those factors. So if we have a country which doesn't have the necessary freedoms for the diseases identified, or that they do not for whatever reason conduct control or surveillance of those diseases, then there's no real way for us to budge on that. And those are the prerequisites for the scope of countries that can be looked at to be approved. Thank you.

David Pembroke:

All right. To the next question, and there's a couple of parts to this. Why is a BC3 facility required for post entry? And then the second part of the question is the draft BIRA indicates post entry quarantine will be restricted to the new Mickleham facility. Could other facilities be used such as private approved zoo or university facilities?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

BC3 containment. The short answer as to why it is required is because of the airborne transmission of some diseases, some avian diseases. We are seeing an avian influenza outbreak in Victoria at the moment and airborne transmission is a relevant consideration in that, so we need to take account of that. And at this stage no, only the Mickleham Quarantine Facility is an option for imports. Perhaps one day in the future under another review that could be looked at, but at this stage, that's the decision.

David Pembroke:

That's the answer?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Sasha, I believe this one might be directed to you. Some of the lab tests are not available in different countries. How can I meet the import conditions if those lab tests are not available in my particular country of origin?

Dr Sasha Novitski:

And this is for pre-export testing. So for example, diseases such as psittacine bornavirus and psittacine herpes virus, that's one that's only recently been developed here as well. There's not many labs in the world that do run those tests. So one of the ways that you can meet import conditions is having those lab samples sent to the laboratory such as the Australian Centre of Disease Preparedness. Obviously you will need to find out the correct way of sending those samples, but that would be our recommendation, is to look into sending those samples to a lab that is able to test for them.

David Pembroke:

All right. To the next question, and it goes to the involvement of the zoo industry. Can you please make it clear that the zoo industry was not a driving force in the development of this IRA? I.e, Australian zoos did not request this IRA. Tristan?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Yes. The commencement of the review was due to ongoing stakeholder consultation. Originally it was just for pet and household birds. So from that demand, it was later expanded to aviary. So I should say that whilst zoos and aviary places will be eligible, the original commencement of the review was based around pet birds. The most common thing being pet birds stuck overseas that people had taken with them or that they had acquired overseas, because a lot of these species are very long lived.

David Pembroke:

Okay. All right. To the next question, how much of the work done for the psittacine import risk review, which appears very comprehensive and well done, so congratulations to you team. How much can it be applied to other groups of aviary birds, for example finches. Obviously the spectrum of diseases will be different, but presumably the same risk process can be applied.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

The same risk assessment process could be applied. By that I mean, the broad structure of probability and consequence and the risk matrix that results from the interaction of those two factors. Some of the diseases will be common across finches and all sorts of other bird species as well as psittacines. But I wouldn't see the psittacine risk assessment as some kind of a halfway step towards import conditions for finches. That's not on the work plan for the department at present. I'm not aware of significant interest and it would have to be considered and prioritised. And then if the department decided to undertake work on finches or some other species of bird, the full process would be gone through. So having completed it for parrots doesn't mean it's likely to happen for other species.

David Pembroke:

Okay. All right. To the next question, what measures, if any, are taken to ensure that imported birds are truly captive bred, and haven't been laundered in contravention of CITES regulations?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

CITES regulations?

David Pembroke:

CITES regulations.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Yep. So CITES is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. And look, it's not an area that this team manages, there's other areas of the department that look into that, and I'm not aware of all their methods for determining that CITES requirements have been met. I'm looking around, I don't think anyone has got expertise in CITES.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

No.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

No. It is definitely a separate requirement similar to the live import list. It's outside of what we do, but it is a requirement for the trade in those birds and it is regulated in its own separate part of the government and also by the international convention.

David Pembroke:

Got it. Okay. The next question, will zoos and sanctuaries have priority over individuals? Tristan?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

In terms of priority for imports, no, that's not how it works. Once the import conditions go live just like any other import into Australia. So as long as you can meet the conditions and get the relevant sign off the relevant testing then the permits get processed, and that's about that. Now, given there is only the one biosecurity containment facility for aviary birds.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

I think they've got three.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

Three, sorry. If they are fully booked out and there's that much interest, then yeah, there will be a wait, but that's just because of the limited space.

(Postscript: there are two BC3 rooms – that could be used for aviary bird cohorts).

David Pembroke:

Right. So no additional change there, I suppose, or preference. Okay. So the next question, BFDV mutates rapidly. How about new strains which would prove fatal to our endangered psittacines? There are plenty of examples of new strains emerging in shelters and other facilities, and then getting released into the wild.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

It is a little bit of a tricky one because it is endemic. I think the best way to look at this is to actually submit through the, Have Your Say and supporting references or argument for this and then we can have a better technical look at that. We do actually concern ourselves with a recombination and mutation of certain diseases. For instance, in a number of our other avian policies, recombination and mutation of strains is something that we do consider for say Newcastle disease and also infectious bursal disease virus. So yes, absolutely, we can consider that.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

But it's important we make policy based on evidence, so we do need to see the evidence.

David Pembroke:

Okay. To the next question, what processes are in place to stop an importer, shifting a pet bird to an aviary bird?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

I think it's much more likely they'll go the other way. It will be almost certainly cheaper to go through the process for a pet bird than for an aviary bird. So we have measures in place and there'll be a number behind the scenes as well that will prevent misdeclaration. But I think also it's important to remember that once the quarantine process has been fully completed and the birds have been released, whether they've come in as an aviary bird or as a pet bird, then we no longer control their housing. And we've accounted for the fact that they could shift and they could interact with wild birds from time to time. And who knows what kind strange scenarios might develop.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

We've accounted for that in the risk assessment. So even if that does happen from time to time, this policy considers that risk and takes account of it. From a simple administrative perspective, though, it's much more likely people will try to commit fraud in the opposite direction.

David Pembroke:

All right. The next question, will aviary birds be required to spend their life in the receiving facility once released from quarantine. An unmanaged risk in the past was release of birds from registered facilities to the community at a time when diagnostic tests were not available without the ability to track them. This was a real example. Will we have a lifetime tracking database for these animals, Tristan?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

I think I'll start out and then there might be some other comments from the rest of the team. In the risk assessment process, we have assumed that there will be varying levels of contact through different transmission methods with wild populations. Now that ranges from short range aerosol or medium range aerosol for household birds, and then the wild birds that may come into the yard where relevant for those diseases. And also just contamination in birds faeces and dropped feed and that sort of stuff from say outdoor aviary cages. It does also include recognition that pet birds, some are trained for free flight and also on their owner's shoulders. And some do get out into the wild unfortunately for the owners.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

So the disease risks that we've assessed, we do consider those scenarios in conjunction with the relevant transmission pathways for those diseases. In terms of lifetime tracking, once released from biosecurity control as we call it under the legislation, it then falls under the state and territory regulations. So some States and territories will have different regulations for keeping certain species and this will vary between state and territory.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

I should also mention there is a method of permanent identification required to match up birds from the exporting country to Australia. So such as the microchips, which are scanned at both ends to ensure that the correct bird is being tracked. In terms of a national registry, I believe that work is underway looking at that.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Yes. There are people in the department looking at that issue at the moment they're working on it. But again, that's another area, so we don't have the latest intel on that. I don't want to make guesses as to exactly where it's up to.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Now we are about four and a half minutes away, and I do want to give you an opportunity to have a bit of a summary or get a summary here from the team. And I know they're very grateful for all of your questions, but we will just see if we can get one or two more. How is it ensured that household pet birds will remain as indoor birds for the course of their life, which may be very long and not repurposed as aviary birds. And does this extend to any offspring hatched in Australia?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

I think that sounds like a very similar question to one we had a moment ago. As we've indicated, when the birds have been released from biosecurity control, that's typically the end of the department's involvement, but state and territory jurisdictions may have their own rules that come into play. That's not something we typically regulate, but we will only release animals from biosecurity control when we are satisfied that the risks have been appropriately managed. And in the risk assessment, we have made the assumption that there will be instances where these birds get out and interact with wild birds when they shouldn't, and we've accounted for that risk.

David Pembroke:

Another question, can the 35 day quarantine period be waived for pet birds? Tristan?

Dr Tristan Ingle:

No.

David Pembroke:

Short and the long answer is no.

Dr Tristan Ingle:

I guess a little bit on that as I think we've mentioned is that those quarantine periods both onshore and in the other country are determined by the disease risk period, including potential latency and incubation. With subclinical diseases or long latency, we also then may require testing usually on both sides of the fence. So, no.

David Pembroke:

Very good. All right. Now, listen, I think we might make this one the last question. My parrot has a 316L stainless steel cage, which is disinfected twice daily with F10SC. I am happy to have a new one made for her in Australia and sent to Mickleham. Will it be possible to take the cage out of the quarantine centre when she is released?

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

I can see it sounds like a very fancy cage. I'd be reluctant to part with it.

David Pembroke:

Can't argue with that.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

That's right. This is a very operational issue, so we don't have the operational people here. However, we do have a lot of cages for other industries that are kept in the quarantine facility. And at the end of the period, they can be properly disinfected when animals are released. There's a full clean down and disinfection process, so I expect that a cage or those cages should be able to be returned to clients, but we'd have to confirm with the operation people.

David Pembroke:

For sure. All right. Listen, before we do go, are there any concluding remarks that anyone from the team here would like to make of the audience understanding though, that there are questions that we haven't been able to get to today. I know that the team will take those on notice and get answers back to everyone who has participated today. And I know that I speak on behalf of the team when they express their gratitude for you giving up your valuable time this afternoon to listen to the presentation. But, Murli I might throw to you.

Dr Murli Baker-Gabb:

Cool, thank you. Look, thank you everybody for your questions that came in. Hopefully we've managed to answer a number of your questions and allay some concerns and give you a little bit of a better idea as to our processes and where we go from here. So this isn't yet finalised. It's important to remember

that this could change between now and us finalising it. However, all submissions, all comments will be looked at and will be assessed before we make a final decision and publish the policy. But even at that stage, that doesn't mean imports begin immediately. There still has to be the import conditions produced and the operational side of things nutted out. But, if the draft is an indication of where we're going, I do expect imports can be facilitated with appropriate biosecurity measures.

David Pembroke:

Now those questions, should you have them, please submit those via the departments' have your say platform. And you can see up on your screens as we speak the details of where you can have those questions placed. And those questions and submissions on the draft will be accepted until the 19th of September, 2020. So please make note of that particular date, the 19th of September, 2020. And a transcript of this webinar from today will also be made available on the department's website.

David Pembroke:

On behalf of the department and behalf of the team here, Tristan, Murli and Sasha, thanks to you team for answering the questions and thanks to you, the audience for joining us here today.

David Pembroke:

Until next time, it's a big thank you on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Water, and the Environment, and we will be in touch with you into the future. It's bye for now.