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Press Release – 5pm – 6 February 2017

To: The Management Committees of All Australian Racing Pigeon Federations, Combine Entities, Country Clubs, One-Loft Races and Fancy Pigeon Associations.

Re: Update 4: Highly infectious Rota-virus outbreak in Australia; impact on Racing for 2017

Further to previous ANRPB Press Releases of January 2017 the following update applies;

1. A Rota virus vaccine suitable for pigeons does not currently exist in Australia.
2. Through the exhaustive efforts of Dr Colin Walker and the expert professional team that Dr Walker has been working with across various agencies, an Australian produced vaccine could be available by the end of this year but no later than March 2018.
3. The vaccine once available will potentially protect birds against the highly infectious Rota virus, thus preventing the loss of perhaps between 15% and 40% of the total pigeon population in Australia.

The ANRPB had been awaiting expert advice on whether or not a Rota virus vaccine could be made available prior to the commencement of Racing in 2017 before forming a view on whether or not racing should proceed.

In forming a position on Racing for 2017 the ANRPB took into consideration; the following:

- When the outbreak hit WA in May and June 2016, and WA Federations were forced to suspend their race program, the rest of Australia continued with their race programs.
- When the virus appeared to clear in WA and they resumed their race program with reportedly good results, some 10 weeks later birds from Busselton were transported on the WA race unit resulting in birds from Busselton becoming infected with the virus.
- Genetic testing has confirmed that the viral outbreak in Victoria is the same as WA.

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- The outbreak in Victoria and Country SA appears linked to the Kyabram sale, this being some 6 months after the viral outbreak in WA. ***Hence infected birds, even though they may appear healthy, can still be highly infectious “carriers” for periods of perhaps 6 months.*** If this was not the case then the outbreak would not have occurred in Victoria, country SA and more recently in New South Wales.
- Consequently, should fanciers whose lofts have been infected by Rota virus post December 2016, in the months prior to racing, it is very likely that their surviving apparently healthy birds are “carriers” of this highly infectious disease and would spread the virus to currently healthy lofts resulting in perhaps 15 – 40% loss of that owner’s birds, and as the virus continues to spread perhaps 15 – 40% of the total pigeon population in Australia.
- The ANRPB is of the view that Animal Welfare Organisations would be extremely concerned should those in decision making positions of the various Clubs, Combines, Associations and Federations not demonstrate due diligence and duty of care in ensuring that their decision making was based upon the “best interests” of our birds’ health and welfare.
- The Rota virus is not currently a “Notifiable” disease, although the Senior Veterinarians’ of state Agriculture Departments’ have been notified and are taking a keen interest. Currently it is not known what impact the Rota virus may have on other bird populations; e.g. chicken industry, quail industry, doves, canaries etc. Should it be demonstrated that the Rota virus cross contaminates then it may well become a “Notifiable” disease.
- It is acknowledged that the Australian National Pigeon Association has cancelled all of their pigeon shows for 2017 as a direct consequence of the Rota virus.

Taking the above-mentioned issues into consideration the ANRPB strongly recommends that any fancier whose birds contracted the Rota virus, within the past 6 months, does not race their birds in 2017, and maintains strict Bio-Security measures to prevent the spread of the virus by apparently healthy “carriers”.

The ANRPB also strongly recommends that decision makers in the various pigeon clubs and organisations review their plans for scheduling of the 2017 Racing Season, taking into

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consideration information contained in this Press Release, and the expert information provided via the web site: <http://www.melbournebirdvet.com/pigeon-virus-update.aspx>

Should Racing proceed in 2017?

The ANRPB acknowledges that there are differing factors in each state or territory.

For the Australian Capital Territory there have been no confirmed reports of the Rota virus. Decision makers need to review the proposed race program with a view to carefully selecting race-points, whilst maintain stringent bio-security measures, to minimise the risk of Rota virus infection. Weekly review of the new schedule is recommended.

For Tasmania there have been no confirmed reports of the Rota virus. However, given the spread of the virus in Victoria the decision makers in Tasmania need to consider cancelling cross Tasman racing for 2017.

For Queensland there have been no confirmed reports of Rota virus. Queensland decision makers may consider proceeding with their race programs, but with weekly review and suspension should an outbreak occur. Race-points should be within state boundaries.

For Western Australia the initial miss-diagnosis, and manner in which the virus was subsequently managed has meant that the Rota virus has significant coverage. WA's geographical isolation from other states also provides a natural barrier. (The ANRPB trusts that the WA fancier who advertised and sold birds interstate refrains from doing so again until such time as a vaccine becomes available). Decision makers should be mindful that much remains unknown about the Rota virus; e.g. just how long the immunity lasts post loft infection. The possibility of a further outbreak in 2017 cannot be ruled out.

For South Australia the outbreak occurred at Pt Augusta some 300kms North of Adelaide. The virus has now spread to 6 lofts in Pt Augusta. The outbreak originated from a fancier attending the Kyabram sale in Victoria. Subject to appropriate bio-security measures being undertaken by the Pt Augusta fanciers, and similarly for the Wellington One Loft where birds recently arrived from Sydney, it is recommended that decision makers review and modify

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the proposed race program for 2017, to ensure that race-points are within state boundaries and significantly clear of Pt Augusta and Wellington.

For Victoria, and the Greater Melbourne Federations, the ANRPB strongly recommends that decision makers suspend all racing for 2017 and maintain strict bio-security measures.

For Country Victoria it is recommended that strict bio-security measures are maintained to either protect your own birds, or prevent the spread of the virus.

Should racing proceed it would undoubtedly lead to a significant spread of the virus to current healthy populations of pigeons.

For New South Wales, and the Greater Sydney Federations, the ANRPB strongly recommends that decision makers review their recent decision to proceed as planned with racing for 2017.

Should racing proceed it will undoubtedly lead to the spread of the virus and perhaps the death of 15-40% of the pigeon population of NSW. Particularly affected will be fanciers in clubs outside the Sydney area that currently do not have the virus.

For country NSW it is recommended that strict bio-security measures are maintained to either protect your own birds, or prevent the spread of the virus.

Summary:

The ANRPB acknowledges the far reaching ramifications of the above recommendations and understands that they may not be well received by many fanciers. However, the ANRPB is a “pigeon welfare” based organisation and makes recommendations at this time in the best interests of both the health and welfare of our birds, but also in the best long term interests of our sport.

The ANRPB does not have a mandate to dictate to the decision makers of the various pigeon sporting bodies and the final decision making rests with the clubs, associations, combines and federations.

The ANRPB would however, remind office bearers that they do have a “duty of care” to demonstrate “due diligence” in the administration of their respective sporting bodies.

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The ANRPB is in no doubt that Animal Welfare Organisations would be most concerned should decision makers not demonstrate such “due diligence” and as a consequence the highly infectious Rota virus continues to spread killing perhaps between 15 and 40% of our pigeons, and amounting to the deaths of many thousands of pigeons.

The ANRPB therefore appeals to decision makers to place the “best interests of our birds’ health and welfare” and the best long term interests of our sport at the forefront in their decision making process with the knowledge that a vaccine for Rota virus will most likely be available well before the commencement of the 2018 Racing Season.

Yours sincerely

For and on behalf of the Australian National Racing Pigeon Board Incorporated.

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