MEDIA RELEASE

WEST NILE VIRUS CONFIRMED IN BC HORSES

During the past two weeks, two horses in the Cache Creek area have shown clinical signs of West Nile virus infection. Blood tests on both horses show high levels of antibody against the virus indicating active infection.

BC has been fortunate in the past few years as it has not seen West Nile cases, even though the virus has been active in all the Western Provinces and States.

Clinical signs of West Nile virus in horses include muscle tremors of the face, chest and body; weakness in the hind legs; fever; depression; and in severe cases, inability to stand. These symptoms are because the virus attacks the brain and spinal cord nerves. Treatment of affected horses can only be supportive as antibiotics are not effective against viral infections. Vaccination prior to exposure is the only way to prevent infection; it is too late to vaccinate after symptoms appear.

Most horse owners are well aware of the dangerous consequences of West Nile infection and vaccinate annually, but many have decided to take a chance and miss annual booster shots. Veterinarians strongly recommend that all horses receive an annual booster vaccine to ensure a high level of immunity. Even if the horse has missed a year or two, a booster shot will restore immunity within a few days. If a horse has never been vaccinated for West Nile, it should receive two doses (two-to-four weeks apart, then an annual booster).

In addition to vaccination, horse owners should take precautions to reduce the mosquito populations around the barn and pasture areas, avoid having horses out when mosquitos are active, and use fly sheets and face masks when horses are turned out.

West Nile is a serious disease and prevention is vital as without vaccination, there is no certainty that the horse will survive the acute infection. Horses that do survive may be left with long-term muscle weakness and be unsound for use.

For more information, please contact Dr John Twidale, Chair, Equine Committee, CVMA-Society of BC Veterinarians Chapter, by phone (604.930.8090) or by email (horsedoctortelus.net).

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West Nile Virus and Human Health

The BC Centre for Disease Control has information on its website regarding West Nile Virus and human health. It says that West Nile Virus (WNV) is considered to be the most widely distributed vector-borne disease in North America, and has now been detected in BC. From 2002 through 2012 there have been 5094 clinical cases (i.e. showing symptoms) of WNV infection in Canada. It is only one of many diseases around the world that are spread by mosquitoes. Although most people who get infected will not feel any symptoms, the disease can be serious for one person out of about every 150 who are infected. Fortunately, it is fairly easy to lower your risk of infection, by avoiding mosquito bites.

For more information about WNV and human health, please visit the BCCDC web site at http://www.bccdc.ca/dis-cond/a-z/_w/WestNileVirus/default.htm