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Introduction

As you flip or scroll through horses for sale advertisements, you'll often notice that critical little abbreviation tucked away after the horse's name - (imp.) - meaning the horse was imported.

We all accept this usually means the horse will have a few extra zeros after their price tag or, more likely, have that little three letter acronym - POA.

But, have you ever stopped to think about the process of importing horses? Specifically, how are we sure that horse isn't carrying diseases and is actually safe to be in Australia?

What is Quarantine?

Most people are aware of quarantine - a period of isolation where an animal can be tested, treated and monitored for signs of illness. But, the truth is there's a lot more to importing a horse than quarantine. And, it all starts at a veterinarian's desk in Canberra...

The Australian Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (the department) is the authority that sets the policies and regulates the importation of live animals into this country. The department has offices all over the country, including at every major port, but the headquarters are in Canberra.

The department is the single largest employer of veterinarians in the country, and they and their numerous other highly skilled and qualified colleagues are responsible for ensuring the horse you're currently drooling over does not pose a risk to the Australian horse population.

The following focuses on importing horses from countries other than New Zealand and New Caledonia. New Zealand and New Caledonia have a similar animal health status to Australia and so importing live animals from these countries is much simpler and, in most cases, the animals are not required to perform a period of quarantine on arrival in Australia.

Separate conditions also exist for the importation of equine semen, which are not discussed in this article. Contact the department for advice on importing equine semen or horses from New Zealand or New Caledonia.

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Importing Horses: Step 1

The first step to importing a horse (or any live animal for that matter) is to conduct a biosecurity import risk analysis or BIRA as set out in Biosecurity Act 2015. The key focus of a BIRA is to determine which diseases of biosecurity significance (either exotic to Australia or of significance to the horse industry) a horse could carry.

Australia is fortunate to be free of many equine pests and diseases that affect other parts of the world, so the conditions to import a horse to this country are necessarily stringent.

The pests and diseases that could pose a risk with an imported horse include:

Equine influenza, equine viral arteritis, equine infectious anaemia, equine piroplasmosis, equid herpesvirus-1, contagious equine metritis, surra, glanders, African horse sickness, Dourine, Venezuelan, Eastern and Western equine encephalomyelitis, Japanese encephalitis, vesicular stomatitis, rabies, borna disease, anthrax and screw-worm fly.

The risk analysis also determines the measures that can be put in place to manage the risk of an imported horse carrying any of those pests and diseases. These measures include a period of pre-export quarantine, veterinary examinations, testing, treatment, vaccinations, or declarations of property or country disease freedom.

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Importing Horses: Step 2

The next step is to determine which countries horses can be safely imported from. Horses can only be directly imported from specific countries that are approved by the department.

These countries are: Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Singapore, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates and the United States.

To import a horse from an un-approved country, it must first spend at least 60, and up to 180, days in an approved country before export to Australia.

These countries have been approved based on both their animal health situation (disease freedom, access to effective vaccines and veterinary therapeutics, etc.), as well as the country's veterinary capability (the veterinary education system, disease surveillance and reporting mechanisms, laboratory capability, etc.) and, in addition, their government's capacity to provide accurate, reliable health certification of animals.

The international movement of live animals relies on direct, government-to-government health certification that is provided by Official Government Veterinarians (OGVs), such as yours truly.

Non-government veterinarians also play a critical role in the preparation of the animal and aspects of the certification, all of which must be checked and endorsed (signed and officially stamped) by an OGV.



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Importing Horses: Step 3

All horses imported to Australia must undergo a minimum of 14 days of pre-export quarantine before travelling to Australia. The PEQ period must be undertaken in specific facilities that have been approved by the department.

Now we've worked out which pests and diseases we're worried about, which tests, treatments and vaccinations we require a horse to have and which countries they can come from, that's it right? We can book the plane now?

Whoa, hold your horses! (Pun intended.) We're not there just yet. The horse still needs to do a period of pre-export quarantine or PEQ.

All horses imported to Australia must undergo a minimum of 14 days of pre-export quarantine before travelling to Australia. The PEQ period must be undertaken in specific facilities that have been approved by the department. Critical aspects of the PEQ period include keeping the horses isolated from non-PEQ horses, ensuring staff have showered before handling PEQ horses as some diseases, including equine influenza, can be carried by people and transmitted from horse to horse, but are easily killed by showering, veterinary oversight of the horses and transport to the airport.

Once the department is satisfied the PEQ facility has documented systems and procedures to meet our requirements, officers then travel to conduct a site audit of the facility. This ensures things on the ground are as they say they are in the manual.

It also allows us to conduct interviews with PEQ staff and government veterinarians that are involved in the export of horses. Audits are conducted every two, or in the case of facilities with a strong compliance history and an uncomplicated operation, every four years. All costs associated with these PEQ inspections are borne by the import agent who operates the PEQ facility.

Approved PEQ facilities are located in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and the United States. So, horses living in approved countries without PEQ facilities must first travel to a PEQ facility to commence their preparation for import to Australia. Bear in mind some of these facilities are only available for the PEQ of racehorses or shuttle stallions.



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Horses travel via cargo aircraft in special air-stalls, and are fed, watered and cared for by in-flight grooms and, on longer flights, a veterinarian will also often travel with the horses.

- IRT: <http://www.irt.com/>
- Equine International Airfreight: <http://www.eiaf.com.au/>
- New Zealand Bloodstock: <http://www.nzb.co.nz/>

Horses travel via cargo aircraft in special air-stalls, and are fed, watered and cared for by in-flight grooms and, on longer flights, a veterinarian will also often travel with the horses. Most horses cope very well with flying and some may even prefer it to road travel as travel via air is so much smoother.

All horses imported to Australia from approved countries other than New Zealand and New Caledonia must undergo a minimum of 14 days of post-arrival quarantine in Australia. Horses are cared for by grooms supplied by the importing company and are monitored for signs of disease, including testing for equine influenza and twice-daily temperature readings.

Most horses undergo quarantine at the government's new quarantine facility in Mickleham, Victoria, whilst horses imported for racing undergo quarantine at one of the quarantine facilities operated by Racing New South Wales or Racing Victoria Limited.

These racing quarantine facilities allow horses to continue to train during quarantine as there are no training facilities at the Mickleham facility, although horses do have access to yards to stretch their legs and get some fresh Australian air!

All going well, with healthy horses and negative equine influenza results, the horses are released from biosecurity control and delivered to their respective, eagerly awaiting new owners!

Importing Agents

Which leads me on to my next, very important point: horse import agents. As you've probably gathered, the importation of horses is a complex business. This complexity, coupled with the fact horses are imported in groups - called 'consignments' - means the process of importation is best managed by a professional horse importer.

It is cost-prohibitive to import just one horse, so horse import agents gather consignments of horses, assemble them in their PEQ facility, ensure all the testing, treatments, vaccinations, etc. are completed according to the Australian protocol, ensure each horse obtains a compliant health certificate, arranges transportation, including flights, and organises the period of quarantine on arrival in Australia.

There are three main agents that import horses to Australia by air. The department works very closely with each company, but if you're thinking about importing a horse, make sure you do your own research and work out which company best suits your needs. They are:

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Conclusion

So, that's importing horses in a nutshell. It's a complex system with lots of intricacies - and for good reason. Australia's biosecurity system works to protect our equine industry from serious disease risks around the world. Protecting Australia's equine health status is of utmost importance. It allows Australia to export horses overseas, and protects our valuable racing and breeding industry, as well as our beloved performance and pleasure horses.

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