Western Canadian Animal Health Network

# WECAHN EQUINE NETWORK OWNER SUMMARY

## OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2025

*The WeCAHN Equine Network held a quarterly videoconference meeting on March 5th, 2026. Network members discussed the animal health events from October to December 2025. Veterinary practitioners, diagnosticians, veterinary college faculty, researchers, and industry representatives attended the meeting. Data were synthesized from Clinical Impressions Surveys completed by network practitioners, Manitoba Veterinary Diagnostic Services (VDS) laboratory, Prairie Diagnostic Services (PDS) laboratory, and University of Calgary Faculty of Veterinary Medicine Diagnostic Services Unit (UCVM DSU), and surveillance reports from other sources or networks.*

## 1) Interesting Cases

An older miniature mare became very sick during transport and showed severe brain-related signs such as disorientation and vision loss. Blood tests showed serious liver damage, and no infection was found. Other travelling horses were unaffected. The horse was euthanized, but no post-mortem was done, so the exact cause was not confirmed. This case shows how quickly severe illness can develop and the limits of diagnosis without post-mortem testing.

On a separate case another older miniature mare first showed eye problems that worsened to eye bleeding and signs affecting the whole body, including weakness and abnormal bleeding from the nose and injection sites. Blood tests showed low red blood cells and very low platelets, suggesting a possible immune-related condition. The horse was euthanized but no post-mortem was done, so the cause was not confirmed. This case highlights how some seemingly minor issues can progress to severe cases but remain unclear without further testing.

Another interesting cases was a 20-year-old Quarter Horse which developed sudden breathing problems that worsened quickly and did not match its past history. Blood tests showed changes in white blood cells, and the horse died suddenly before reaching a referral center. No post-mortem was done, but cancer was suspected. This case shows how serious internal disease can progress rapidly with few early warning signs.

A sport horse developed rapid brain and nerve-related disease within one week, going from normal activity to severe illness. Testing ruled out common viral causes. Post-mortem showed severe inflammation of the brain and spinal cord, with a protozoa (*Sarcocystis bertrami*) detected. The exact cause remains uncertain and the investigation continues. This case highlights the educational value of postmortems in guiding diagnosing of neurologic disease.

Several horses in Manitoba became sick during winter with fever, diarrhea, and mild breathing and neurologic signs. PCR testing confirmed anaplasmosis, which is spread by ticks. This is an unusual pattern in very cold weather and suggests tick-borne disease risk may be changing. Horse owners should stay aware of ticks year-round.

### Discussion: value and perceived barriers to equine post-mortems

The cause of many recent horse deaths was not determined because post-mortems were not done, making it harder to understand disease risks. Common reasons include cost, discomfort with the process, preference to bury horses at home, and less interest once the horse has died, although owners are more likely to test when disease could spread.

Access also affects decisions, with more post-mortems done near the diagnostic lab in British Columbia and through programs like the University of Calgary Diagnostic Services Unit that offer free exams for student cases. When transport isn't possible, veterinarians can sometimes collect samples on-farm, but this is not always accepted.

Insurance cases are more likely to include a post-mortem, usually paid for by the owner. Education and financial support, such as programs from the American Endurance Ride Conference, help increase participation by showing the value of post-mortems for horse health and the wider industry.

## 2) Syndromic and Laboratory Surveillance

**Infectious diseases** remained uncommon and mostly stable, with strangles (*Streptococcus equi* subsp. *equi*) showing some increasing activity while most other diseases were not reported. Overall, infectious disease risk remains low but present, especially for strangles, which continues to appear in some areas.

**Heart-related disease** was rare and stable, with only isolated findings reported and no sign of a broader trend.

**Skin conditions** remained occasional and generally stable, including infections and parasites. Sarcoids and other skin tumors were seen at expected levels and appear to be decreasing, while bacteria such as *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Corynebacterium pseudotuberculosis* were found at normal levels.

**Digestive problems** remained one of the most common issues and were stable to increasing, especially colic, stomach ulcers, and dental disease. Diarrhea was uncommon overall and stable, with causes such as *Clostridium perfringens* and *Rhodococcus equi* detected at expected levels, while strongyle parasites showed some increasing trends.

**Whole-body illnesses** were reported at low to moderate levels and were stable overall, with ongoing cases of fever of unknown cause and conditions such as *Anaplasma phagocytophilum* infection and cancer appearing at expected levels.

**Muscle and bone problems** remained very common and stable, including injuries and fractures, with occasional findings such as laminitis linked to *Sarcocystis* spp.

**Brain and nerve conditions** were reported at low levels and were stable, with occasional cases of inflammation of the brain and no sign of increasing trends.

**Reproductive issues** remained uncommon and stable, with some unexplained abortions and infections such as uterine disease occurring at expected levels.

**Breathing problems** were common and generally stable, including infections and conditions like asthma. Bacteria such as *Streptococcus equi* and viruses like equine herpesvirus were detected at expected levels, with no unusual increases.

**Injuries and welfare concerns** remained common and stable, including wounds, fractures, and dental problems, with no major changes in patterns.

## 3) Scan of emerging and other important diseases

A small number of new equine infectious anemia (EIA) cases were confirmed in Alberta, while most ongoing cases were linked to known infected properties, indicating controlled spread through follow-up testing. Strangles cases were reported in British Columbia, leading to concern and increased vaccination in a region where the disease is usually uncommon.

Highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 continues to circulate in poultry and wild birds across Canada and the United States, with no new cases reported in U.S. dairy cattle in the past month. In the Netherlands, suspected cross-species exposure was noted when investigation of ill and dead cats on a farm led to detection of antibodies in milk from the farm cows. A study in Poland showed that H5N1 in cats can cause rapid, severe illness with high death rates, suggesting cats may act as early indicators of infection on farms

## Owner take aways

- Some serious horse illnesses could not be fully diagnosed because post-mortem exams were not done, which makes it harder to understand disease risks.
- Post-mortems are still not commonly done due to cost, emotional concerns, and logistics, but they are more likely to happen when financial support and education are available.
- Strangles and EIA remain important diseases to watch for, even though most other reportable diseases are seen less often.
- Digestive problems like colic, stomach ulcers, and dental issues continue to be common, and some illnesses such as anaplasmosis still require attention.
- New concerns include tick-borne diseases and highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1, with cats potentially showing early signs of infection on farms.

Financial support was provided under the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative.