

MEDIA RELEASE

23 October 2019

Lab bunnies lives hang in the balance as NSW Government decide their fate

Animal advocates eagerly await a determination by the Office of the Secretary (NSW Department of Primary Industries) as to whether lab rabbits will be given the opportunity to be rehomed rather than killed at the end of their use in the lab.

This comes at a time when NSW DPI and the Animal Research Review Panel are currently developing Research Animal Rehoming Guidelines to assist animal research establishments in the rehoming of animals, where possible and when safe to do so, at the conclusion of research.

The rabbits are currently being used in research for the development of a new vaccine to protect domestic rabbits against multiple strains of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease Virus (RHDV), aka "Calici".

Following inoculation with the prototype vaccine(s), groups of rabbits are infected with different strains of the virus. If the rabbits survive a prescribed period (which most are expected to do) they are killed for post-mortem examination and organ testing. However non-lethal testing is a suitable alternative, and is based on evidence from published peer-reviewed scientific papers, vaccine development guidelines, regulatory requirements, and a statement from European RHDV vaccine manufacturers.

Humane Research Australia CEO, Helen Marston: *"Deliberately bringing the rabbits into this world so they can risk their lives, and survive, yet only to be killed, is grossly unethical and immoral given the availability and acceptability of non-lethal test alternatives."*

Official requests have been made for those rabbits that survive infection (due to vaccination) be tested by non-lethal means and released for rehoming, in accordance with the Australian Code for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes.

Starting January 2018, the request was presented to the lead researcher for the new vaccine project, the director of the laboratory involved, the Director General of the NSW DPI, and NSW Minister for Primary Industries. Subsequently, the matter was raised with the appropriate Animal Ethics Committee and has necessarily been examined by the Animal Research Review Panel for over six months, with a report now furnished upon the Secretary in accordance with the Animal Research Act 1985.

Marston concluded : *"These rabbits' lives hang in the balance while the Secretary deliberates on a decision. Funding was offered to assist, and a rehoming organisation is ready to work with the NSW DPI. A decision to go ahead and kill these animals will only suggest that the NSW Government has no genuine commitment to rehoming ex-lab animals and their draft guidelines are therefore an empty gesture."*

Ends