

EIA: Why Traveling Horses Need “Coggins Papers”

Betsy Wagner, PhD PAS, Department of Animal Sciences, Auburn University

“Proof of Negative Coggins required.”

How often do we see this statement printed on a show bill or prize list? How often do we see this phrase on the advertising for an organized trail ride or clinic? Why is it so important? What’s the big deal?

Equine infectious anemia (EIA) is a potentially fatal viral disease in horses, donkeys, and mules. Also known as swamp fever, it is transmitted from horse to horse via large biting insects such as horseflies and deerflies. It can also be spread through the use of needles and equipment contaminated with the blood of an infected horse. There is no cure and no vaccine.

There are three forms of EIA. Symptoms of the acute illness include high fever, severe anemia, weakness, swelling of the lower abdomen and legs, weak pulse, and irregular heartbeat. Mortality is high. The chronic form is characterized by recurrent fever and anemia, though the horse may relapse and show symptoms of the acute form. In the inapparent form horses do not show any symptoms of the disease but remain carriers. All infected horses are considered carriers for life and have the potential to spread the disease to other horses.

Testing for EIA begins with a veterinarian submitting a blood sample and accompanying paperwork to an approved diagnostic laboratory. Two different testing methods have been approved for use: the agar-gel immunodiffusion (AGI) test and enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) format tests. Both the AGI and ELISA tests screen for the presence of antibodies to one or more antigens of the EIA virus. Equine infectious anemia tests are commonly referred to as “Coggins” tests in honor of Dr. Leroy Coggins who created the AGI test in 1970.

The first step following a positive result on an EIA test is a retest performed by a regulatory veterinarian. If the animal is confirmed positive the owner has three options. They can euthanize the horse, donate it to a facility conducting EIA research, or quarantine the horse for the remainder of its life. Quarantine restrictions in Alabama call for the EIA positive horse to be kept at least 500 yards from any other horse, donkey, or mule. Alternatively, if other horses are present on the farm the EIA positive horse must be confined to a screened or enclosed stall where it cannot be reached by biting insects.

The good news for horse owners is that EIA is rare. Equine infectious anemia is a reportable animal disease, and as such the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service maintains records on cases reported. In 2012, the most recent year for which data are available, there were 1,443,959 EIA tests performed in



the United States resulting in the identification of 38 positive horses. For the same year in Alabama, only one horse tested positive for EIA out of 22,073 tests performed.

Federal regulations require EIA testing in specific situations. Proof of a negative test result is required of all equids entering an exhibition or competition, traveling interstate, or changing ownership within a state. In most cases the test must have been performed within the previous 12 months, though some states or facilities may require 6 months or less. In the case of changing ownership it is recommended that the EIA test be performed no more than 60 to 90 days prior to sale.

Thanks to testing and subsequent removal of positive horses from the population EIA is on the decline. The rate of EIA positive tests has dropped from 4% in 1972 to less than 0.01% in 2005. Today it is estimated that less than 8 out of every 100,000 horses is positive for EIA.

The point of presenting proof of negative Coggins is not to “keep out the sick horses” as some may believe. The purpose of requiring proof of a negative test result is to reduce the likelihood that this disease could be spread among horses participating at the event. Equine infectious anemia is debilitating viral disease with limited treatment options and no cure. When event staff turn away horses that do not have proof of a negative EIA test result the staff are protecting the interests of the owners that do comply.