From: Dr. Brian Joseph, Washington State veterinarian  
To: State and county fair management, adult and youth rabbit exhibitors, rabbit enthusiasts  
Date: June 2, 2021  
Re: Rabbit hemorrhagic disease and 2021 Washington fairs

Cases of rabbit hemorrhagic disease (RHD) were identified in owned and feral domestic rabbits in the San Juan Islands area of Washington State between mid-July 2019 and early January 2020. No additional cases have been recognized since then, and no cases involved wild rabbit species.

A separate and extensive RHD outbreak was identified in March 2020 in New Mexico; this ongoing outbreak has spread to include 13 states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming). This outbreak involves a related (RHDV type 2) but distinctly different virus subtype than the Washington subtype, and it affects wild and domestic rabbit species. The USDA has a map depicting identified RHD cases at https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/maps/animal-health/rhd.

Fair managers and exhibitors are understandably concerned about RHD and 2021 fairs. As always, fair management has the authority to establish policies and procedures for their individual fairs. For 2021, this could range from deciding to conduct rabbit shows as usual to canceling rabbit classes. Regardless of the decisions made for this year’s fairs, here are recommendations from the state veterinarian to reduce disease risk and protect animal health during an exhibition:

- Don’t let the public or other exhibitors contact your animals or their cages
- Keep cage areas clean to help control flies
- Do not allow dogs in rabbit areas—they can move disease-causing organisms via their fur and feet
- Vaccinate rabbits against diseases of concern. RHD vaccine is available through some private veterinarians in Washington; contact the state veterinarian’s office for specifics.
- Wash hands before and after handling rabbits
- Avoid contact with others’ rabbits
- Prevent nose-to-nose contact between rabbits from different premises; this might require solid barriers
- Do not share equipment with others
- Clean and disinfect cages, food dishes, etc. before and after the event
- Use separate carpet squares for each rabbit, or rabbits housed together
- Require judges to wear clean clothing and shoes, especially if from out-of-state. Also require judges to wear new disposable gloves or use hand sanitizer between rabbits handled.

The risk of a rabbit contracting RHD at a fair is extremely low; indeed, pasteurellosis (snuffles) is a much greater concern. Each owner must decide how much risk he/she is willing to accept and weigh this against the benefits of participating in a fair. A rule of thumb when deciding whether or not to take an animal to a fair: do not take any animal you aren’t willing to lose. More info about RHD is available from the USDA at https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/sa-epidemiology-animalhealth-ceah/ri.