

Australia equine flu spreads to thoroughbreds

Sydney (Reuters) – Australia's equine flu outbreak spread to the thoroughbred industry when a horse tested positive at Sydney's premier racetrack and more than 700 horses were confined to stables on Thursday.

„Randwick right now is under lockdown,“ said trainer Anthony Cummings, whose horse tested positive.

All racing in Australia has been cancelled since equine flu was detected last week in an attempt to prevent it spreading to the thoroughbred industry.

Cummings said a second test would be carried out on the horse later. „If this case proves to be positive then that is probably the end of the Randwick spring carnival,“ he said.

Australia's spring carnival is the industry's most lucrative racing period, with Randwick in New South Wales (NSW) one of the main venues. The racing shutdown is costing the industry tens of millions of dollars each day.

Australia's first equine flu outbreak has forced a national ban on horse movements until Friday.

In the worst affected state, NSW, racing has been stopped indefinitely. Racing has been cancelled in Queensland until next week although other states hope to resume racing at the weekend.

The highly contagious disease is not infectious to humans but has the same debilitating effect on horses as influenza has on people; causing high fevers, coughing, sneezing and lack of appetite. In rare cases, it can be fatal to horses.

More than 90 horses have been diagnosed with equine flu and

hundreds more horses are suspected of being infected.

Australia has some of the toughest quarantine rules in the world and officials suspect the nation's first outbreak of equine flu may have come from Japan, which has just been hit by a large outbreak.

Racing was cancelled in Japan last weekend for the first time in more than 35 years after almost 100 horses tested positive.

The outbreak of equine flu has occurred on the eve of Australia's thoroughbred breeding season when some of the world's top stallions arrive from the northern hemisphere.

Some 40 international stallions have been quarantined in Australia and the New Zealand government has closed its borders to horses from Australia, including dozens of top American, European and Asian stallions worth an estimated AUD 500 million.