Pilchard Orthomyxovirus (POMV) fact sheet

Q. When was POMV first discovered?
A. POMV was first discovered in Australia in 1998 in pilchards in South Australia. There were large-scale deaths of pilchards caused by a herpes virus. POMV was also found in these fish but was only an incidental finding (*ie.* the pilchards were not dying from POMV).

Q. Where did POMV come from?
A. POMV has probably been in pilchards for a very long time. The only reason it was eventually found in pilchards was because they were dying from something else (ie. herpes virus). There are many potential disease agents in wild fish populations that go undetected until fish are tested for some reason like a mass mortality. It is also the case that diagnostic tests are rapidly improving which means that disease agents previously not detected are now being found using advanced DNA methods.

Q. Does POMV cause disease in pilchards?
A. There haven't been any reports of pilchards dying from POMV anywhere in Australia.

Q. Does POMV cause disease in other fish species?
A. POMV has only been found in pilchards and Atlantic salmon. We are not aware of any reports of POMV being detected in other species

Q. When was POMV first discovered in Tasmania?
A. POMV wasn't found in Tasmania until 2006 in salmon on the Tamar River as an incidental finding. The first outbreak of POMV in salmon didn't occur until 2012 in the south east of Tasmania.

Q. What is POMV?
A. POMV is a virus that is naturally occurring in wild pilchards in Tasmania's waters. As pilchards are small enough to swim through the nets on salmon farms, and salmon are susceptible to the virus, it can be passed from pilchards to salmon, salmon to salmon, and potentially salmon to pilchards.

Q. Can POMV be transferred from salmon to wild fish species?
A. The available science indicates that POMV is transferred from wild pilchards to salmon with pilchards being the original source of the virus. It is likely that infection could also transmit from salmon to pilchards, but there is no evidence of POMV in other wild fish species. It is commonly the case that infectious agents are very species specific. Given that pilchards are widely distributed in Tasmanian waters and are the original source of POMV, wild fish populations are exposed to this endemic disease wherever pilchards are also present, particularly where they are eaten by other fish species.

Q. Does POMV cause disease in trout?
A. There is no evidence that POMV can be transferred to trout. While recently there has been significant mortality in Atlantic salmon in Macquarie Harbour, there was no disease in farmed trout held close by. Despite this, Huon tested trout in all trout pens to see if they were carrying the POMV virus even at low levels. The testing was undertaken at the DPIPWE Centre for Aquatic Animal Health and Vaccines in Launceston using a very sensitive molecular DNA test known as "polymerase chain reaction or PCR". All samples were negative. Therefore, there is no evidence that the POMV virus transfers to trout.

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Q. Is it dangerous to eat fish that have had POMV?
A. No, eating fish that have had or recovered from POMV does not pose any risk to people.

Q. How long can the virus remain infectious outside pilchards or salmon?
A. Testing to date shows that POMV can remain infectious in water or on nets or other equipment for 12 days.

Q. What is the treatment for POMV?
A. There is currently no treatment for POMV. The fish are monitored by our vet and farm staff and in the event of a serious infection, the fish may need to be humanely culled. We are continually learning about POMV which helps us to put in place husbandry practices that reduce the risks associated POMV.

Q. Can POMV kill salmon?
A. Yes, POMV can lead to mortality in salmon.

Q. Is there a cure?
A. At present, no, but a prototype vaccine does exist. Industry has invested significantly in developing a vaccine and currently a prototype exists. It is expected that this prototype will be used from next year.

Q. What can be done to control POMV?
A. As with any livestock disease, good biosecurity practices are very important in controlling the spread and impacts of POMV. This is an issue faced by all livestock farmers. Key measures include keeping different groups of fish separate from each other to minimise the chance for the infection to be spread. It is critical to keep young fish separated from older fish, particularly if they have had POMV at some earlier stage. It is also important to clean and disinfect equipment. Essentially good biosecurity for POMV involves the same measures that people would be familiar with for minimising the spread and severity of influenza in people.

Q. Have the fish at Storm Bay had POMV?
A. Yes the fish at Storm Bay have had POMV previously. However, there is currently no mortality due to POMV in these fish and recent testing of fish in all the pens has come back negative.

Q. Why can't Huon take the fish back to Hideaway Bay for harvest as normal?
A. Given that there is no current mortality due to POMV and that all laboratory tests are negative, this was considered. However, Huon takes biosecurity very seriously, which is why we have taken the added precaution of harvesting the fish at Norfolk Bay instead. It is extremely important that we break the cycle of POMV infection wherever we can to minimise the future occurrence and impact of the disease.