

Media Release

Ms Mary-Anne Thomas MP
Minister for Regional Development
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WELL-EARNED RETIREMENT FOR CHICKENS ON THE FRONT LINE

Victoria's sentinel chickens are retiring after nearly 50 years on the front line, after new testing and surveillance methods have made it quicker and easier to detect mosquito-borne viruses across the state.

Minister for Agriculture Mary-Anne Thomas has congratulated researchers at Agriculture Victoria who in partnership with the Department of Health have developed faster testing methods for the early detection of mosquito-borne viruses – providing laboratory results within days.

This new molecular testing method enables mosquito samples to be screened directly and has been used in Victoria since 2019 to screen mosquitoes for Ross River virus and Barmah Forest virus.

Since 1974, Victoria's sentinel chicken program has played a crucial role in providing the community with an early warning about emerging risks to human health from some mosquito-borne viruses.

The chickens, housed in mosquito-prone areas along the Murray River and tributaries, have played a key part in the state's mosquito-borne disease surveillance, relying on the natural circulation of mosquito-borne viruses.

Weekly blood samples were tested by scientists to assess if birds had been exposed to the mosquito-borne viruses – *Murray Valley encephalitis virus* and *West Nile virus (subtype Kunjin)*. Results from this form of testing would often take weeks.

The latest cohort of 175 chickens have now retired from the program, with many of them being rehomed in the local community by flock managers.

Rapid risk assessments for mosquito-borne viruses are undertaken from mid-spring to mid-autumn each year as part of the *Victorian Arbovirus Disease Control Program*.

These activities determine whether the state is at increased risk of these mosquito-borne viruses and if it requires public health warnings to better protect Victorians from mosquito-borne diseases.

The Andrews Labor Government is protecting and modernising the agriculture sector through its 10-year Agriculture Strategy.

For more information visit: betterhealth.vic.gov.au/beat-the-bite.

Quotes attributable to Minister for Agriculture Mary-Anne Thomas

"The success of the sentinel chicken program is a credit to Victorian scientists, field vets, animal health workers and volunteers who have cared for the flocks."

"We are pleased to see how research has prevailed with new testing methods allowing for a quicker and faster detection of the virus – keeping Victorians safe."