



Australian Government

Department of Agriculture,
Fisheries and Forestry

Joint Interagency Taskforce: Exotic Animal Disease Preparedness

Quarterly Report – June 2023



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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land and sea, waters, environment and community. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, their culture, and their Elders past and present.

Contents

Summary	iv
National leadership, accountability and coordination will allow speed to decision and action	1
National crisis communications can be strengthened through the creation of a national strategy... 	2
National data and intelligence capability will enable more effective decision making.....	3
National plans and policies should be regularly monitored, tested, reviewed and updated to ensure they remain appropriate for the scale of response that would be warranted by an incursion of an EAD	4
Workforce capacity	7
Mission critical supplies.....	8
Working with states and territories	9
References	10

Summary

On 8 August 2022, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and Minister for Emergency Management, Senator the Honourable Murray Watt formally requested the establishment of a time-limited Joint Interagency Taskforce: Exotic Animal Disease Preparedness (the taskforce).

The taskforce was to:

- Ensure that all biosecurity plans are integrated with the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework and with State and Territory emergency management arrangements.
- Undertake a series of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) and lumpy skin disease (LSD) incursion scenarios to determine respective roles and responsibilities and identify additional actions necessary to ensure we are in a position to quickly contain and/or eradicate the disease and mitigate the consequences should an outbreak occur.
- Provide advice to Government on additional efforts or measures that might be necessary, including additional regulatory or legal measures or additional personnel if applicable.

The taskforce considered the current level of national preparedness and made seven findings and 14 recommendations for action that would build on existing planning and capacity and increase the preparedness of the national system for the speed and scale of response likely to be needed should Australia face an incursion of an Exotic Animal Disease (EAD).

Recommendation 7 tasked the department with undertaking a quarterly update on action taken on each recommendation.

This is the third quarterly progress report.

Work continued between April and June 2023 to deliver the various strategies and plans that contribute to enhancing preparedness across the national biosecurity system. Much of this work also complements and contributes to the recommendations of the taskforce.

These strategies and plans include:

- National Biosecurity Strategy
- Commonwealth Biosecurity 2030
- Animalplan 2022 - 2027
- Lumpy Skin Disease Action Plan
- Northern Australia Biosecurity Strategy 2030

The department has developed an implementation 'roadmap' to progress the taskforce recommendations. This has included extensive consultation with key stakeholders to identify relevant actions set out in the complementary strategies and plans. The intent of the roadmap is to holistically consider preparedness activities across the national biosecurity system to ensure that the implementation of taskforce recommendations supports ongoing initiatives and does not duplicate effort.

This report summarises the high-level actions and outcomes against each of the recommendations.

National leadership, accountability and coordination will allow speed to decision and action

Finding 1:

There is strong support for Australian Government national leadership in preparedness, planning and response.

This was highlighted through the scenario discussions and engagement with stakeholders, noting that States and Territories are the first responders to any incident that occurs within their jurisdiction and have primary responsibility for emergency management activities, including for biosecurity; and noting the shared responsibility of industry.

Lessons from COVID-19 and the recent fire and flood disasters have elevated public expectations of national leadership when a crisis or disaster is of national significance. Lessons from the UK 2001 FMD outbreak also highlighted the importance of national leadership and speed to action and decisions.

The roles and responsibilities of the Australian Government, States and Territories are being explored through Exercise Paratus.

Recommendation 1

That Government consider updating the national coordination architecture to ensure closer integration of the National Coordination Mechanism and the DAFF-led National Coordination Centre.

Recommendation 2

That Government consider negotiation of a new instrument to replace the 2002 Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG) memorandum of understanding on FMD, to align with contemporary crisis management arrangements, to operate beneath the Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity.

Action to date:

National leadership, accountability and coordination

The department has established a Crisis and Emergency Management Branch to centrally coordinate all-hazards emergency management across the agriculture, fisheries and forestry portfolio. This branch will also lead the engagement with Australian, state and territory governments and industry bodies on policies and plans as they relate to emergency response, including for biosecurity.

Current reviews of Australian Government arrangements, including the comprehensive review of the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework, provide an opportunity to explore how responses to biosecurity incidents can leverage off the capabilities across government.

The National Biosecurity Strategy (NBS) has been identified as comprising key complementary activities against several of the taskforce recommendations, including in relation to national leadership and coordination. A National Implementation Committee has been established to support the delivery of the NBS and will consider actions to enhance preparedness and response capability through improved coordination, regional planning, increased collaboration and faster information and data sharing. Working through the National Implementation Committee, the department seeks to align the delivery of related taskforce recommendations.

Legend:

 In progress Planned activity

National crisis communications can be strengthened through the creation of a national strategy

Finding 2:

The Commonwealth, states, territories and industry have established communications frameworks and pre-prepared messages to be deployed during a biosecurity incident. The National Biosecurity Communication and Engagement Network (NBCEN) has commenced work on national communications and engagement plans. These communications frameworks and NBCEN have been proven effective for smaller scale incidents. The speed and scale of a response to an EAD, and lessons learned from COVID-19 and recent fire and flood disasters, warrant a review of these arrangements.

Recommendation 3

Building upon the work of NBCEN, that Government considers engaging a crisis communications consultancy to accelerate the development of a national crisis communications strategy and 'playbook' to set out strategies, decision-making frameworks and pre-prepared content for initial actions across key time horizons (one hour, six hours, twelve hours, twenty-four hours, three days and seven days).

Action to date:

National crisis communications

In May 2023, the National Biosecurity Communications and Engagement Network (NBCEN) conducted a final workshop for the Crisis Communications Response Guide ('playbook') to ensure it was reflective of jurisdictional and industry processes and protocols. The playbook has also been considered by the Animal Health Committee (AHC), which comprises jurisdictional Chief Veterinary Officers and industry representatives.

As part of the national biosecurity exercise program, Exercise Paratus, a discussion exercise was held with departmental officials in late June to validate the department's response protocols and the crisis communications playbook, using a suspected outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) as the scenario. Evaluation of the exercise has commenced and lessons will inform continual improvement to the playbook, including through the Biosecurity and Agricultural Emergency Network supporting the National Biosecurity Committee (NBC).

The department is finalising a Lumpy Skin Disease (LSD) prevention and preparedness communication plan to support the next stage of LSD awareness and engagement activities. This will be provided alongside an LSD specific national emergency response communication plan to NBCEN, AHC and the NBC.

The redevelopment of the website, outbreak.gov.au, was completed in this quarter. It provides an information portal for current responses to outbreaks, emerging risks to Australia, advice on preparing for and responding to an outbreak, details of biosecurity response arrangements and plans and agreements between the Australian government, state and territory governments and industry. The new site is underpinned by a website user experience strategy to ensure the benefits achieved in the redevelopment are maintained into the future.

National data and intelligence capability will enable more effective decision making

Finding 3:

National coordination would be required to provide a common operating picture to enable rapid, coordinated decision-making.

There are a range of systems, data streams and processes at the state/territory and industry level, which are not able to be quickly or easily integrated at the national level. States and territories identified that having a national dashboard was a critical aspect of managing an EAD incursion.

It is important to use modelling to understand where the highest risk regions are to inform targeted surveillance and managing a response

There is a need for a holistic and integrated national traceability system. The taskforce notes that an in-principle agreement has been reached between all state and territory governments and the federal government on rolling out a mandated sheep electronic identification system.

Recommendation 4

Building on the recommendations from the Matthews and Craik reviews, that Government consider establishing a national biosecurity data and intelligence capability that informs the national collection, processing and dissemination of intelligence to inform decision making on biosecurity preparedness and responses at the federal level. This capability would integrate data from various sources to develop national current (e.g., situation dashboards) and estimative intelligence products (e.g., strategic indicators and warning problems) that inform crisis response, contingency planning and decision making.

Recommendation 5

That Government consider commissioning modelling to determine likely weather events that could transport LSD virus infected vectors to a location where they

could infect livestock, to enhance surveillance to increase the chances of early detection of an incursion.

Action to date:

National data and intelligence capability

A number of actions from the NBS focus on increased collaboration and faster information and data sharing to support the biosecurity system's resilience and adaptability. This work has been identified in the National Implementation Planning phase and will be further developed through ongoing actions.

A summary of the [Qualitative and Quantitative risk assessment](#) for the introduction of LSD virus into Australia via non-regulated pathways was presented to industry representatives at a webinar in May 2023. Approximately 800 people registered for the event and a recording of this presentation is available through the [National Farmers Federation](#).

A national Australian Animal Disease Spread Model - Lumpy Skin Disease (AADIS-LSD) is being developed, with the completion of a revised synthetic cattle population and review of spread pathways underway. Testing of the model's spread pathways and review of control measures and the use of vaccination is planned shortly.

The department's strategic review of its existing and future data capability and capacity requirements is continuing. The review is considering what technologies will be needed to deliver bespoke, tailored systems and how they will be maintained into the future. It is also considering the technical skills that will be required to support this work. Outputs of this project are helping to guide the development of modelling tools and workflows to support rapid decision making.

National plans and policies should be regularly monitored, tested, reviewed and updated to ensure they remain appropriate for the scale of response that would be warranted by an incursion of an EAD

Finding 4:

The taskforce’s scenario discussions have revealed a high level of expertise and understanding within and between jurisdictions about animal disease prevention and mitigation. Industry is also well-connected into this system.

The speed and scale of a national LSD and/or FMD response would be greater than that for other, more routine, incidents. This is illustrated by the heuristic model. Integration between biosecurity and emergency management agencies continues to mature. It is important that the system as a whole has confidence in and visibility of this preparedness. We note that the review of the AUSVETPLAN FMD response strategy is in the process of being completed by AHA.

Recommendation 6

That all jurisdictions review and rationalise with a purpose of modernising and maturing key response plans and policies more than three years old (for example standard operating procedures and response manuals) to ensure they are contemporary and incorporate lessons from COVID-19 and recent hazard events, i.e., Black Summer Bushfires.

Recommendation 7

That action on recommendations in this report, accepted by the Minister, be reported to the Minister quarterly.

Recommendation 8

That Government consider expanding upon its work through Exercise Paratus to:

- include a tabletop exercise which explores the application of state and territory and Commonwealth biosecurity legislation in respect to an LSD or FMD incursion.
- support Animal Health Australia (AHA) to fully exercise the system and processes for vaccine import, and exercise with the states and territories for the distribution of both LSD and FMD vaccines to ensure there are no critical delays should vaccines need to be quickly imported and distributed.
- develop an ongoing schedule to review and exercise plans and documentation beyond the life of Exercise Paratus, with responsibilities assigned to specific roles. These exercises could include the minister and include a focus on resource modelling.
- re-exercise the International Animal Health Emergency Response (IAHER) manual, including follow-up with international partners, and include the Department of Home Affairs to pre-determine and exercise the processes for securing international assistance under the IAHER, including the most efficient visa process. IAHER is a formal arrangement that provides participating countries access to additional human resources in the event of an emergency animal disease outbreak.

Recommendation 9

That Government consider expanding on current work across government to conduct modelling of potential economic impacts and develop a just-in-case policy response for support and recovery to respond to second and third order consequences in the event of an EAD outbreak.

Recommendation 10

That NEMA and DAFF work with Defence to develop contingency plans to support nationwide biosecurity response activities in an EAD outbreak. Envisaged roles include planning and operational support for logistics, movement control and liaison functions, although this has not been consulted with Defence.

Recommendation 11

That DAFF work across government to consider options for creating more opportunities for First Nations people and Traditional Owners to participate in and benefit from biosecurity activities including surveillance and feral animal management.

Action to date:

National plans and policies regularly monitored, tested, reviewed and updated

In relation to recommendation 6, a number of actions from the NBS focus on developing and enhancing working relationships across government and industry with a view to improving the national coordination of response activities. These activities include reviewing governance arrangements to ensure they include relevant stakeholders and undertaking national and regional level exercises to test plans and strategies.

The department has been designing a strategic risk framework that defines a proactive, collaborative, and integrated approach to risk management across the entire biosecurity system. It aims to provide strategic level guidance to the department to assist in evaluating risks that may hinder the achievement of the group's objectives.

In relation to recommendation 8, a mid-point review of the national biosecurity exercise program, Exercise Paratus, is underway. Nine of the 12 planned activities have been completed and the findings of the review will inform the future focus of the program – including how the taskforce recommendation on Exercise Paratus can be applied.

In June, as part of Exercise Paratus, a communications exercise was delivered (see recommendation 3). The scenario-based discussion exercise focused on crisis communications, building upon previous work to consider actions in response to a suspect major EAD detection, including how the concepts of crisis appreciation can inform collaborative and proportionate decision-making. The exercise is currently being evaluated and lessons will contribute to improving the department's response protocols and the crisis communications playbook.

In relation to recommendation 9, the department has completed work to inform policy advice as needed in relation to recovery for an EAD incursion (the progress report for the March 2023 quarter refers). The department will review the work periodically to ensure currency of advice and continues to engage with disaster funding reviews that are ongoing across the Australian Government.

The department continued to collaborate with the Centre of Excellence for Biosecurity Risk Analysis (CEBRA) as part of its work to calculate the return on investment for the biosecurity system as a whole. An innovative approach to create a library of pest establishment and spread trajectories has been successfully implemented by CEBRA and is in the process of being tested by the department. Outputs from this work will help the department prioritise resources to align with higher risk biosecurity activities.

Action to date - continued

National plans and policies regularly monitored, tested, reviewed and updated

In relation to recommendation 10, having identified opportunities to enhance the department's strategic coordination capabilities (see recommendation 1), future work will consider opportunities to engage with Defence as part of any broader reviews of Australian Government arrangements, including through the comprehensive review of the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework. Work to consider how existing or enhanced civilian capabilities can be engaged during an EAD outbreak will also be explored.

In relation to recommendation 11, the department has updated and refreshed its Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). The RAP identifies how the department will support, build and improve relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It articulates the department's shared determination to advance reconciliation in its workplaces and communities and sets a path for how to achieve the vision through a practical plan of action.

During this quarter, as part of the Indigenous Ranger Biosecurity Program, ranger groups in northern Australia completed 181 fee-for-service animal biosecurity activities and submitted 429 observations, including community animal surveillance and mosquito vector monitoring.

The department administered four Biosecurity Business Grants, totalling \$1.2 million, to fund biosecurity projects designed to enhance Indigenous economic outcomes and engagement with agriculture in northern Australia. One of these projects aims to manage climate change-driven pathogen biosecurity threats to human and animal health through a two-way collaborative approach.

Workforce capacity

Finding 5:

All jurisdictions will need to be able to quickly identify and deploy capability in the event of an EAD incursion. Australia has plans for quickly acquiring specialist skills such as veterinarians and epidemiologists from overseas. Jurisdictions have indicated their capacity to rapidly scale-up is likely to be limited by workforce shortages across the system.

An initial 72-hour stock standstill will be a critical period for resources. The next phase of the response will require concurrent response and will include assess and approve stock movement permits, biosecurity orders, testing and quarantining of properties. A strategic and coordinated approach to the deployment of workers in an incursion is warranted. Unions should be consulted in the development of such a strategy, where appropriate.

Recommendation 12

That Government consider working with jurisdictions to develop a system-wide strategy for national animal disease response workforce capacity and training, noting DAFF's previous Vet Reserve program could be used as a guide.

Action to date:

Workforce capacity

The Animal Health Committee's National Framework for Engagement of Private Veterinary Practitioners Task Group completed the review of the 'National Guidance document on the Engagement of Private Veterinarians during an Emergency Animal Disease Response' in June 2023. The updated guidance document is available on [the department's website](#).

The department is currently reviewing a report on the potential scope and options of a Southern Australia veterinary network to provide ongoing exotic animal disease information and training to veterinary practitioners.

A total of 40 subsidies to assist veterinary students in undertaking practical placements in northern Australia have been funded through the Northern Australia Biosecurity Strategy. The veterinary student placement subsidies will increase animal disease workforce capacity particularly within northern Australia by giving veterinary students training and practical experience at working within tropical Australia.

Mission critical supplies

Finding 6:

Based on observations and comments through the scenario-based discussions, there are already mission critical supplies that are impacted by current supply chain issues. This will be further exacerbated in the event of an incursion. This would impact the ability to operationalise response plans.

Recommendation 13

That DAFF, jurisdictions and industry should work together to develop a resource plan, including identifying the mission critical supplies needed to operationalise response plans.

Action to date:

A national Vaccine Operational Policy Task Group has been established under the Animal Health Committee's Sub-Committee on Emergency Animal Disease (SCEAD), which will be responsible for developing national recommendations for the use of vaccination during an outbreak. Membership of the national Vaccine Operational Policy Task Group consists of all jurisdictions, the Commonwealth and Animal Health Australia (AHA).

The Vaccine Operational Policy Task Group will also be tasked with developing operational plans for using vaccination against other important livestock diseases. The different ways to apply vaccination during an outbreak will be modelled, to give the Vaccination Operational Policy Task Group guidance on what the best approaches are from a disease control perspective. The economic considerations for the use of vaccination will then need to be modelled and assessed.

The department is actively engaging with the National Emergency Management Stockpile (NEMS) project being led by NEMA. Critical supplies for EAD response are being scoped as part of the project.

Working with states and territories

Finding 7:

The taskforce experienced strong engagement from state and territory biosecurity and emergency management agencies, including through the three scenario-based discussions.

Recommendation 14

That Government consider further work with the jurisdictions on:

- a national approach to interstate border control and permitting to ensure efficient and effective interstate border security movements as part of the enforcement of a livestock standstill or movement controls.
- continuing engagement by biosecurity agencies with relevant emergency management agencies to ensure that there is alignment and integration of incident management structures.
- reflecting the common definition for prohibited pig feed (PPF) and the feeding of PPF developed and endorsed by Animal Health Committee (AHC) in state and territory legislation.
- review and update of plans for:
 - carcass disposal sites, and where relevant establish agreements for the movement of carcasses between local government areas for disposal.
 - accessing remote or isolated livestock, particularly in Northern Australia, including during adverse weather or flooding, for surveillance, testing or other activities.
 - cold-chain management of vaccines.
- options to utilise personnel from workforces that would be stood down as a consequence of an FMD or LSD outbreak.

Action to date:

Working with states and territories

Work with all jurisdictions on biosecurity priorities continues via NBC and associated subcommittees.

A review of the legislation in all jurisdictions has been completed to ensure harmonisation and agreement with the national definitions of prohibited pig feed.

As manager of Australia's FMD vaccine bank, AHA is undertaking a desk top audit of the bank and all processes associated with the import and transport of vaccines into Australia, including cold-chain management. State and territory governments have responsibility for the transport of vaccines within their jurisdictions.

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