



Australian Government

Department of Agriculture,
Fisheries and Forestry

Joint Interagency Taskforce: Exotic Animal Disease Preparedness

Quarterly Report – March 2023



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Cataloguing data

This publication (and any material sourced from it) should be attributed as: DAFF 2023, *EAD Preparedness Taskforce, Action on recommendations March 2023 update*, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Canberra, September. CC BY 4.0.

This publication is available at agriculture.gov.au//biosecurity-trade/policy/emergency/exotic-animal-disease-preparedness-report

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Acknowledgements

The authors thank interview and survey participants for their input.

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.

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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 established 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 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 second quarterly progress report.

The focus between January and March 2023, has been to identify how a range of existing strategies across the national biosecurity system either complement or contribute to the recommendations of the taskforce. These strategies and plans include, but are not limited to, the:

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

The department is developing 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 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 continues to consult with the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) across a range of issues, including how DAFF emergency response arrangements can be more closely integrated with the national coordination architecture. Consultations have identified opportunities to enhance the department's strategic coordination capabilities. Future work with NEMA will focus on how these opportunities can best be implemented in consideration of any broader reviews of Australian Government arrangements.

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

The department has continued to work with crisis communication specialists and the National Biosecurity Communication and Engagement Network (NBCEN) to finalise the Crisis Communications Response Guide (the 'playbook') to enhance communication preparedness.

A playbook has been developed and includes communication decision-making trigger points reflecting the broader framework for response actions. It also includes pre-prepared templates, describes roles and responsibilities, and media protocols for the initial stages of an EAD incursion. The department plans to hold a discussion exercise in June 2023 to test elements of the playbook.

Since the beginning of the LSD outbreak in Indonesia, the department has worked in partnership with NBCEN members to increase communication and awareness activities surrounding LSD in an effort to decrease the risk of an incursion and promote producer and community awareness.

Ongoing biosecurity awareness activities include various social media and website updates, webinars, podcasts, education program content and border signage. Communication guides have been created that set out response triggers for communication activities, governance arrangements and a series of prepared messages across various mediums (website, media release, social media etc.), to be refined depending on the details of the incident, and that can be rapidly activated if needed.

Industry webinars on LSD and FMD were held in March 2023 with members from across the animal industry. The webinars provided an overview and reassurance of the communication activities the department would implement in the first 72 hours of an EAD outbreak. Further webinars with plant and retail sectors are planned in the coming months.

To help coordinate and disseminate nationally consistent information relating to pest and disease outbreaks, a project to modernise the content and functionality of the 'Outbreak' website (outbreak.gov.au) is being undertaken.

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 will 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 project developing an enhanced intelligence capability for the department continues. It seeks to enhance intelligence capabilities about threats to biosecurity to inform strategic and operational decision-makers. Progress was made during this quarter against each of the project's four capabilities which are: intelligence priorities and requirements; stakeholder engagement; the leadership and management of intelligence professionals; and the management and leveraging of data and systems.

The department has also undertaken a strategic review of its existing and future data capability and capacity requirements. To strengthen national real-time modelling capabilities during an outbreak, stakeholder workshops have been held to identify gaps and priorities, using LSD as the test case.

A risk assessment has been commissioned to model the potential for a disease incursion through non-regulated pathways, such as windborne spread of insects. This work will be used to guide future modelling and vector studies and aid in targeting future surveillance and preparedness activities. The [Qualitative and Quantitative risk assessments](#) for the introduction of LSD virus into Australia via non-regulated pathways was released on 15 March 2023.

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, following on from a joint government and industry exercise that concluded on 6 December 2022, a writing group has been convened to revise the AUSVETPLAN Response Strategy for LSD. Refinements focus on movement controls for live animals, vector management, vaccination and the development of susceptible animal-free buffers.

In relation to the live animal exports sector, the department is working with interested stakeholders to develop operating principles, incident management procedures and contingency arrangements for managing the potential impacts of EADs on livestock conveyances, including if vessels carrying livestock detect diseases such as LSD and FMD.

In relation to recommendation 8, the department is continuing to deliver activities under Exercise Paratus. In February 2023, a scenario-based discussion exercise was held with the Biosecurity and Agricultural Emergency Network (BAEN) – comprising representatives of all state and territory biosecurity agencies, Animal Health Australia (AHA) and Plant Health Australia (PHA) – which focussed on building interjurisdictional planning capabilities for national-level EAD incursion responses.

The department has also commenced a mid-point review of the Exercise Paratus series to consider how best to strategically align the remaining activities with jurisdictional and departmental capability development priorities. The review will inform the planning of future activities and consider the recommendations made by the taskforce specific to Exercise Paratus.

In relation to Recommendation 9, the department completed work in relation to community recovery should we need to provide advice in the event of a severe to catastrophic EAD incident.

In relation to recommendation 10, having identified opportunities to enhance the department's strategic coordination capabilities (see recommendation 1), future work will consider opportunities with Defence as part of any broader reviews of Australian Government arrangements.

In relation to recommendation 11, over 60 rangers from 21 Indigenous ranger groups across northern Western Australia and Northern Territory received animal biosecurity training as part of Biosecurity Fundamentals - workshops designed for rangers taking part in the Indigenous Ranger Biosecurity Program.

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

A number of actions from the National Biosecurity Strategy focus on developing and sustaining a highly skilled workforce. This work has been identified in the National Implementation Planning phase and will be further developed through ongoing actions, including to identify current and future skills needs in key areas and develop a national workforce strategy to build, retain and deploy capability.

The Northern Australian Biosecurity Surveillance Network (NABSnet – a network of over 50 vets who service northern Australia) held a masterclass in Darwin for private and government veterinarians which was aimed at increasing knowledge of exotic diseases, EAD preparedness and training. Representatives from each northern jurisdiction attended the masterclass.

The masterclass was held adjacent to the Australian Cattle Vets conference. The program involved updates on LSD and other relevant EADs as well as workshops on collecting appropriate samples for EADs and practising entry/exit procedures at premises where there is a suspected EAD. There is regular engagement and discussion with NABSnet vets to encourage LSD exclusions and reporting. The NABSnet website is also regularly updated with newsletters and relevant resources.

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:

Mission critical supplies

National testing capability for LSD will be transferred from the Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness (ACDP) to all state and territory government laboratories through the existing Laboratories Emergency Animal Disease Diagnosis and Response (LEADDR) network. Regional testing capacity is also being supported by the ACDP in near neighbour countries.

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 the National Biosecurity Committee (NBC) and associated subcommittees, including the Animal Health Committee (AHC).

At its meeting in March 2023, the NBC considered a range of key issues including.

- Commonwealth led preparedness activities
- Jurisdictional preparedness progress
- Crisis communications products
- National biosecurity training material
- Scope and application of the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed (EPPRD) and the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement (EADRA)

NBC communiqués are available on the NBC page: [National Biosecurity Committee - DAFF \(agriculture.gov.au\)](#)

References

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