



# Joint Interagency Taskforce: Exotic Animal Disease Preparedness

Quarterly Report – March 2024



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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.



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# Summary

On 8 August 2022, the former 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 DAFF with undertaking a quarterly update on action taken on each recommendation.

This is the sixth quarterly progress report.

Work continued between January and March 2024 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 to 2027
- National Lumpy Skin Disease Action Plan
- National Agricultural Traceability Strategy 2023 to 2033
- Northern Australia Biosecurity Strategy 2030.

DAFF 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.

# Finding 1: National leadership, accountability and coordination

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

Throughout the quarter, work was undertaken to advance the Coordinated Preparedness and Response priority action under the National Biosecurity Strategy (NBS). A series of surveys, focus groups and Action Development Workshops were conducted on NBS priority areas in early 2024 to inform the first National Biosecurity Strategy (NBS) National Action Plan (NAP). Initial actions for the coordinated preparedness and response priority are focussed on interoperable surveillance and data sharing systems and the development of national biosecurity recovery principles.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's (DAFF) Crisis and Emergency Management branch continues to progress activities to contemporise preparedness and emergency management arrangements across all-hazards, including to further integrate biosecurity hazard and consequence management into whole of Australian government emergency management arrangements.

Collaboration with the Department of Health and Aged Care is continuing to ensure rapid information sharing and decision making across agencies during cross-sectoral emergencies.

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Legend:  In progress  Planned activity

## Finding 2: National crisis communications

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

This recommendation has been fully achieved following finalisation of the Crisis Communication Playbook in 2023.

NBCEN continues to promote biosecurity awareness through social media, website updates, webinars, podcasts, education program content and border signage; participating in training exercises; and updating communication tools, manuals, guidelines and resources during peacetime.

## Finding 3: Establishing a national data and intelligence capability

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

Regarding **recommendation 4**, government and industry continue working collaboratively to implement national mandatory individual electronic identification (eID) for sheep and goats, working towards 1 January 2025. This will further improve the accuracy and efficiency of our already robust systems. The updated [National Implementation Plan](#) was released on 27 September 2023.

Work is ongoing to [uplift the National Livestock Identification System database](#) and its supporting systems which will help modernise Australia's data capture, storage, and distribution system for tracking livestock and their movements. The project is being delivered by Integrity Systems Company in consultation with the Australian Government and industry stakeholders.

The Action Development Workshops conducted in February 2024 to inform the first NBS NAP (recommendation 1 report refers) also addressed NBS priority area 'integration supported by technology, research and data.' Draft actions include the development of a national biosecurity research database and activities to strengthen community and local government engagement in research and technology.

Implementation of **Recommendation 5** is complete following publication of the ['Quantitative Risk Assessment for the Introduction of Lumpy Skin Disease Virus into Australia via Non-Regulated Pathways'](#).

## Finding 4: National plans and policies

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 [REDACTED]

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

Regarding **recommendation 6**, Implementation of the [National Agricultural Traceability Strategy 2023 to 2033](#) continues under the auspices of the Australian Agricultural Traceability Governance Group and supported by DAFF to provide a nationally coordinated approach to enhancing agricultural traceability for biosecurity, trade, food safety and other outcomes. The second (and final) public consultation on the draft *National Agricultural Traceability Strategy: Implementation Plan 2023 to 2028* closed on 29 February 2024. The draft implementation plan is expected to be finalised mid-2024.

The AUSVETPLAN Technical Review Group met face-to-face during February 2024 with a focus on workshopping movement controls for several response strategies, discussing high pathogenicity avian influenza, and refining the 2024/25 AUSVETPLAN workplan. The draft workplan was presented to Animal Health Australia's Member Engagement Week on 19 March and will be formally progressed for approval to Industry Forum and Animal Health Committee (AHC) in the near future.

The AUSVETPLAN resource document—African swine fever response operational guidelines for pig abattoirs has been endorsed by the AHC; and the AUSVETPLAN Response Strategy—Foot-and-Mouth Disease has now been fully endorsed including the section on management of livestock in transit when a national livestock standstill is declared.

Activities continue to progress through the NBS to develop and enhance relationships across governments and industry to improve the national coordination of response activities.

In relation to **recommendation 8**, planning for final activities to be delivered under the Exercise Paratus program is underway, and arrangements for ongoing and systematic conduct of exercises and lessons management processes are being developed under the department's emergency management capability development program.

In relation to **recommendation 9**, DAFF has continued to engage with ongoing disaster funding reviews across the Australian Government and is continuing to assess and identify second and third order consequences. Further development of recovery policy for biosecurity events is ongoing and remains a priority for DAFF.

In relation to **recommendation 10**, DAFF has undertaken a review of the current Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) it holds with the Department of Defence setting out how the two departments interact to support each agency's respective objectives, and consulted internal stakeholders to ensure their business needs were captured in the updated MoU. The MoU and schedules are on track to be finalised in the coming months.

Regarding **recommendation 11**, The Northern Australia Biosecurity Strategy is investing in the Northern Australia People Capacity and Response Network (NAPCaRN), which delivers several First Nations initiatives to build capacity and capability outside of the ranger stream. These include an intern program and targeted Vocational Education and Training courses.

DAFF has established a Steering Committee on First Nations Policy to drive actions, including those set out in the First Nations Platform (the platform). The platform sets out five flagship initiatives, with Flagship 2 being a First Nations Workforce Strategy. The First Nations Branch is working closely with DAFF's Transformation Taskforce on the alignment between Flagship 2 of the Platform, and Transformation priority action 7 on workforce planning and development, both of which will advance this recommendation.

## Finding 5: Workforce Capacity

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

The AHC task group—National Framework for the Engagement of Private

Veterinary Practitioners Phase 2—has completed its work and will submit a final report to AHC summarising their activities and recommendations.

The annual Northern Australian Biosecurity Strategy Network (NABSnet) Masterclass was held in Darwin 15—16 March 2024. The network provides ongoing support for veterinarians in northern Australia via regular newsletters, contact through the NABSnet Veterinary Adviser, online resources and subsidies for significant disease investigations and EAD exclusions. Regular e-communications with NABSnet veterinarians encourages reporting and exclusion testing for LSD.

The NABS Animal Technical Working Group met in March 2024 and agreed to a range of projects aimed at boosting national capacity to prepare for and manage an emergency animal disease. Additionally, NABS investment in the NAPCaRN (previously described at recommendation 11) includes several investments aimed at building capacity and capability to manage an EAD incursion in the north.

The NBS highly skilled workforce priority aims to develop and sustain the pipeline of biosecurity skills needed for the future, within government, industry and the community. The Action Development Workshops conducted in February 2024 (previously described at recommendations 1, 4 and 6) to inform the first NBS NAP considered the identification of current and emerging critical skills gaps as a key focus area for NBS implementation.

## Finding 6: Mission critical supplies

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

DAFF continues engaging with the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) on their [National Emergency Management Stockpile \(NEMS\) project](#), and

quadrilateral partners on carbon dioxide supply issues, to progress this recommendation.

The Commonwealth is currently seeking information from jurisdictions, through AHC, on mission-critical supplies that may need to be stockpiled for EAD responses. This includes consultation with relevant agencies and industries within their jurisdictions. Input is expected to be finalised mid-May to provide a national picture of critical supplies needed for EAD response and identified gaps.

As of February 2024, the Vaccine Operational Task Group (VOTG) has met five times and is progressing development of operational plans required to use a registered LSD vaccine during an outbreak. The VOTG is prioritising development of vaccination strategies against LSD before focusing on other important livestock diseases.

## Finding 7: Working with states and territories

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

The second Animalplan 2022 to 2027 Progress Report published in February 2024 describes several projects that bolster Australia's emergency preparedness and ability to respond to emergency animal disease, including the EAD Crisis Management Planning project; Carcass Disposal Destroy and Let Lie project; Disposal Priority project focussing on pyrolysis and composting as methods for large animal disposal; Enhancement of One Biosecurity System; Building EAD preparedness in domestic abattoirs; Exercise Milky Way; and the National Livestock Identification Scheme (NLIS) Database Uplift project.

The Action Development Workshops conducted in February 2024 to inform the NBS NAP (previously described at recommendations 1, 4, 6 and 12) produced several draft actions with relevance to this recommendation, which seek to strengthen partnerships and networks between all stakeholders at local, regional, national and international levels.

# References

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