



Australian Government

Department of Agriculture,
Fisheries and Forestry

Joint Interagency Taskforce: Exotic Animal Disease Preparedness

Quarterly Report – December 2022



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Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

GPO Box 858 Canberra ACT 2601

Telephone 1800 900 090

Web agriculture.gov.au

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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.

Foreword

On 8 August 2022, Minister the Hon Murray Watt formally requested the establishment of a time-limited Joint Interagency 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).

The department is taking a project management approach to action these recommendations, building upon the detailed, well-rehearsed animal health response plans already in place, enhancing national leadership and further refining the system's preparedness and ability to respond at speed and scale if required.

The department is aligning recommendations from the taskforce with other activities and recommendations, and the department's reform program, to deliver improvements. The taskforce's recommendations are geared toward cultivating a readiness mindset across and between the Emergency Management and Biosecurity systems.

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

This is the first quarterly update report.

Chris Locke
Deputy Secretary
Biosecurity and Compliance Group
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

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Summary

Work has commenced on the taskforce recommendations, particularly on recommendations relating to crisis communications and planning (both for exercises and general preparedness and training).

Initial priority action plans for each recommendation have been developed.

Discussions with jurisdictions on several actions are ongoing, with further work scheduled.

Priority is being placed on ensuring the department is equipped to effectively respond to an emergency animal disease incursion.

Capability uplift is required, through design, training, equipment and other resources, with ongoing exercising and regular testing and verification of the system necessary to embed enhanced arrangements into business-as-usual activities.

While considerable progress has been made across all jurisdictions to build, mature and exercise general preparedness and response capabilities, further focus is being applied across several areas to ensure that the biosecurity system is well positioned to respond to any significant emergency animal disease incursion. Areas of additional focus include workforce availability, effective and efficient supply chains and maintenance of social licence to undertake appropriate response activities.

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

Immediately prior to the taskforce establishment, the department updated the Australian Government Biosecurity and Agricultural Response Plan (AUSBIOAGPLAN) to align with the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework (AGCMF). This included clearly articulating how the national biosecurity system arrangements – including the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement (EADRA) – interact with AGCMF tools and mechanisms such as the National Coordination Mechanism (NCM).

Negotiation of a new instrument to replace the 2002 COAG memorandum of understanding has not commenced.

The Exercise Paratus Program Concept was refined following the release of the taskforce report to focus on validating and practicing the recently updated departmental response arrangements. Activities conducted to date include validating and practising the key actions in the first 24 hours of a response and the coordination arrangements set out in a newly drafted concept of operations (CONOPS) for exotic animal disease.

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

A crisis communications specialist agency was engaged in November 2022 and is working with the department and jurisdictions to enhance communications preparedness. A well-developed draft playbook has been prepared and is currently being reviewed. A gap analysis has been undertaken and is being reviewed to identify additional actions. The National Biosecurity Communication and Engagement Network (NBCEN), comprising communications officials from all jurisdictions' agriculture departments as well as industry representatives, is engaged in this work. A stakeholder engagement plan and an overarching communications strategy is in draft.

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

The National Biosecurity Committee agreed in September 2022 to develop a national biosecurity data sharing capability framework, in light of increasing animal disease risks facing Australia. This work is underway through a cross-jurisdictional technical working group.

The department has a new digital incident management system in development with a production version available in early 2023 that will enhance the ability of the department to manage biosecurity incidents and responses.

The department is refining its assessment of the risk of an LSD incursion via unregulated pathways, including via international spread of vectors undertaken in consultation with the Bureau of Meteorology. Initial technical work has identified areas for further work to improve decision making in relation to these unregulated pathways.

An analysis of animal biosecurity intelligence activities has been undertaken to support the identification and communication of emerging animal health threats.

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. A meeting of the IAHER signatories (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States) has been convened for March 2023 to discuss the exercise proposal recommended in the taskforce report and agree exercise scope and objectives.

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

Since the taskforce report was released, the department has augmented the AUSBIOAGPLAN by drafting a hazard specific concept of operations (CONOPS) for exotic animal disease codifying how the department will establish a National Coordination Centre. The draft CONOPS was exercised as part of the Exercise Paratus program in December 2022 to validate the arrangements and will be further developed in 2023.

Exercise Paratus was modified in response to the taskforce report and has focused on the department's response arrangements, including key actions in the first 24 hours. Further exercising is planned in 2023; including a national functional exercise, coordinated with jurisdictional and industry stakeholders. Precise timing is under discussion with key stakeholders. Smaller scale exercises and planning workshops are continuing.

The department has worked with AHA, state and territory governments and industry groups to revise the AUSVETPLAN Response Strategies for FMD and LSD. The revised strategies were published in 2022. The department published the National Lumpy Skin Disease National Action Plan in 2022. This plan was developed through extensive engagement between stakeholders in industry, state and territory governments, and other organisations.

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

Developing and sustaining a highly skilled workforce to ensure we have the right capability, in the right place, at the right time is a priority area within the National Biosecurity Strategy.

The department has trained a number of designated response personnel and senior leaders and decision makers in establishing a National Coordination Centre.

Training has been delivered for key DAFF SES to undertake department spokesperson roles in a crisis.

Incident management training has been delivered for designated response personnel with 40 staff completing a 2-day accredited course in Australasian Interservice Incident Management System (AIIMS). A project has been commenced to mainstream AIIMS training through the recently established Biosecurity Training Centre.

A Southern Australia veterinary network has been developed, complementing existing Northern Australia veterinary network (or NABSNET) to provide ongoing exotic animal disease information and training to veterinary practitioners.

Training on EADs has been provided to abattoir workers through MINTRAC Program. Further training is being developed in order to utilise abattoir workers in an EAD response.

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

Supply chain mapping work has been undertaken to provide economic impact assessment capability.

Recovery planning is in train, including compensation options.

Aggregate price and production impacts have been linked with ABARES farm survey data to produce regional (farm level) impact analyses.

LSD/FMD Trade Impact modelling work is being progressed.

Review of the AUSVETPLAN decontamination manual is underway and the AUSVETPLAN foot-and-mouth disease Response Strategy is with Animal Health Committee for endorsement.

The department is undertaking an ongoing review of APVMA permits for disinfectants for use in an outbreak.

The department is working with NEMA to consider biosecurity supplies as part of the National Emergency Management Stockpile.

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

Coordinated preparedness and response is a National Biosecurity Strategy priority. In September 2022, the NBC agreed to collectively progress work to strengthen the biosecurity system through implementation of the taskforce recommendations.

The Animal Health Committee (AHC) has undertaken work to support jurisdictions to develop resource plans for a major FMD response.

In September 2022 the NBC noted progress on livestock traceability, with an update provided on the work of the Sheep and Goat Traceability Taskforce established under the NBC. The Commonwealth is working with industry and governments to co-design, and implement, individual electronic identification for sheep and goats by 2025, a key component of the National Agriculture Traceability Strategy (NBC 2022).

The department and other jurisdictions are supporting research and development to manage humane destruction and disposal of animals in the event of an EAD outbreak. The outcomes of this research will be provided to AHC for consideration in policy development as appropriate.

References

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