# Foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) Travel Professional Webinar

Program overview transcript

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## Introduction

This is the transcript of a webinar, presented by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. This webinar was produced for travel professionals as an aid to support them and provide information that would assist the preparation and education of their clients who are travelling to FMD-affected countries.

## Transcript

[Webinar begins]

Deanna Emms: Welcome to today’s webinar, hosted by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry providing information about Australia’s biosecurity requirements for travellers, in particular to Indonesia. I’m Deanna Emms and I will be facilitating today’s forum. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to join us. I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional custodians of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples attending today. I’d like to remind people we are recording this webinar and it will be published on the website. We’d like to express our appreciation to Australian Federation of Travel Agents (AFTA) for the support in promoting this webinar and we note that the CEO Dean Long is joining us today. Our topic today is all about Australian biosecurity and what information travellers need to know. Many of you will be aware of the heightened focus on foot-and-mouth disease or FMD. Now, we know you are all the travel experts, so we are hosting this webinar to support you to prepare and educate your clients who are travelling to FMD-affected countries, especially Indonesia. We will also share some links at the end to provide further information for you. Today we are going to hear from Vikki Fischer, who is an Assistant Secretary, Biosecurity Operations Pathway Policy, Travellers and Mail and Imported Food. Vikki has extensive experience in the biosecurity and travel space and will be sharing her knowledge with all of us today. We will then look forward to answering your questions as part of the Q&A session. Please add your questions into the Q&A box on your right at any time throughout the presentation. You may put your questions in as anonymous or with your name. I welcome Vikki and I will now hand over to you.

Vikki Fischer: Thanks Dee. And thank you all for attending this afternoon. We will try and keep it short and sweet, but I really do appreciate all the work that has gone on behind the scenes to set up today and the fact that you guys are turning up to listen to us talk about the importance of biosecurity. So, hopefully most of you have heard of the term biosecurity and are vaguely aware at least of the importance of keeping Australia biosecurity safe. This helps to protect our agriculture industry, of course, you know it protects our productivity, our crops and how well they grow, as well as our trade and trading partners look to Australia because we are clean and green but it’s also vital to our community, to our environment and obviously the tourism industry. We do have a unique environment in Australia, and we are a desirable travel destination and we want to keep it that way. Certain foods, plant material and animal products from overseas can present serious pests and diseases into Australia. So exotic pests and diseases that we don’t already have here things that we call biosecurity risk material. These will be devastating to our valuable agriculture industries as I said, but also to tourism and our environment and our way of life.

So, biosecurity has played a critical role in reducing risk and shaping our nation to become one of the few countries in the world to remain free of the world’s most invasive pests and diseases. Some of you if you have been around for a little while might remember AQIS. AQIS was our original biosecurity brand, the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service. Biosecurity is a little bit more of a continuum, it’s pre border, at border and post border protection so it’s not just the inspection service that we used to point to a few years back. So, to protect Australia, we must apply biosecurity measures offshore, at the border and onshore.

Our biosecurity system protects agricultural industries worth over $81 billion at the moment. The tourism sector which is worth, I think, about $50 billion; our environmental assets worth over $5.7 trillion; and more than 1.6 million jobs. All of this, provides the way of life in Australia that we value so much, and will be at risk if we fail to maintain a strong focus on biosecurity and managing the potential threats. Not only do we depend on a healthy environment for our fresh water, and our fresh food and our prosperous society, but biosecurity also allows us to protect our culture and the value of our wider community and our First Nations people.

So once, just to give you a bit of a picture, once we were a whopping big continent and we really did rely on being a wonderful island so far away from everything else. And if you go back the last time we did have foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in Australia it was in the days of sailing boats. Not quite sure how a sick cow even made it as far as Australia to be honest but once the disease got here it was very quickly eradicated because we had a very small population and there was no increased travel. So, that was how we managed I think, a lot by luck, but we were a long way from other countries and there wasn’t a lot of travel. Today we move to the travel that we’ve got which is wonderful and so, so great that we can move on and offshore quite easily and get around Australia quite easily, but if you track how this is operating right around the world the amount of travel has certainly spread diseases. And you can certainly see in that middle part of this slide that we’ve got a couple of acronyms up there. Good public servants, we operate in acronyms. There’s African Horse Sickness to the left, there’s foot-and-mouth disease right in the centre, there’s African Swine Fever which I always class as the Ebola of the pig population, that devastating disease where the pigs basically die from internal bleeding. We’ve got Varroa Mite down there in New South Wales. You may have heard that we’ve had a bit of Varroa Mite discovered near Newcastle and there is a process going on at the moment eradicating Varroa Mite that would be absolutely devastating to our honeybee industry. And BMSB is Brown Marmorated Stink Bug which is a pest of the horticultural industry and so on but also a real community pest. It gets into your air conditioning units and your cars and it hibernates in comfy places. Comes and finds a nice safe place you know in your ceiling or wherever. And it does stink and it causes a lot of stresses overseas.

Now the key reason we’re chatting with you at today’s foot-and-mouth webinar you’ve probably heard a lot on the news and if you haven’t seen a foot mat yet at the airport just go and check out anyone that’s coming in from Bali. So, foot-and-mouth disease is a highly contagious disease which affects all your cloven hooved animals. These are the guys with toes, a split hoof. So, it’s your sheep and your cows, your pigs, and your goats, and camels, so it’s not just cattle although a lot of people do see it as cattle. It’s all of those animals. It spreads by close contact between animals, it lives in the mucus and the spittle of the animals. But it can also be carried on animal products, it’s carried in meat for a long time, dirty equipment, our clothing if we get mucus on our clothing or we’ve got manure on our boot. And it can actually still be transported by the wind. Lucky for us it’s still in Indonesia and it couldn’t travel here by wind so it’d only come to us in what we would call regulated pathways. So, travellers in particular can carry the disease. It could come in the mail if people were sending meat in the mail, so travellers, mail, it could also come in through imports that’s why we’ve got such stringent requirements for our imports and our cargo and our vessels. So, in May this year we had an outbreak reported in Indonesia, although we were aware of the first cases being back in April and by July it had already found its way to Bali. The archipelago is made up of islands that are quite close and there is a lot of movement of livestock. So it’s not very surprising, but it is a rapid spreading disease.

Now the risk hasn’t been this close to Australia for a very long time and the risk profile, if you like, that’s what we term it has changed and we have got heightened border activities and hence you have heard about foot mats. So, foot-and-mouth disease, the virus, can survive in frozen, chilled and freeze-dried fruit, food, sorry – not fruit, but food so predominately meat and dairy products and it will an survive in the infected animals who consume these products. So, the big risk is really somebody bringing meat with the disease and feeding it to animals. That is a very direct pathway. It is illegal to feed swill, that’s what it is called, feeding those sorts of scraps to pigs but you can imagine that it does happen. Sorry, that’s not the only way, that’s just a classic pathway that we, a scenario that we are regularly testing in the department.

An outbreak would result in the euthanasia of millions of our livestock, and it’s not just a threat to the livestock sector, it will impact a number of other agricultural industries right through our supply chain and as we have seen in other countries it will be felt well beyond the farming communities. There will be impacts on hospitality, on tourism, on the domestic supply of food, potentially on movement of people, you won’t be allowed to move, possibly, you won’t be allowed to move out to regions and so on. And so if FMD was to occur in Australia, all cattle will be stopped movement for at least 72 hours. And we’ve lived through COVID, we know how horrendous it is when things are brought to a grinding halt like that. So, the humane destruction of the animals is required to control the disease, there is definitely a vaccine as well and animals would need to be vaccinated immediately but livestock will be killed and then they have to be disposed of as well and then you need to decontaminate the affected premises. There would be all other sorts of tracing and surveillance because your aim is to get back to eradiation and back to a freedom status so you can trade again. An FMD outbreak is likely to limit travel within Australia, with travellers like I said before, potentially unable to visit farms or rural areas and for those of you who may remember and even those who don’t, just jump online and Google it, the UK much smaller than Australia and much less livestock suffered an extreme outbreak of FMD, of foot-and-mouth, back in 2001 and it did originate we’re told, it originated where unprocessed food leftovers, that’s what I was referring to before, swill, was fed to pigs and the swill did have virus, and from there the disease did spread very quickly to over 2,000 premises just in Britain and the outbreak lasted for seven months and led to the slaughter of more than six million animals.

Now if we look at somewhere like Indonesia, not quite the same structures that we have in the UK and we don’t expect the disease to be contained quite so quickly or easily and seven months and the death and destruction is certainly not easy. So the crisis of FMD, which began as a farming disaster, had a much wider impact on a range of sectors, most notably on tourism and to limit the spread of FMD their government advised the public at the start of the outbreak to stay off farms and avoid contact with animals, farm animals and then they closed walking and horse-riding trails so that was about 240,000 kilometres of public rights-of-ways in Britain where a lot of visitors do walk, or did. That was all closed down and other tourist attractions and events were closed, national parks, forest areas and these measures were like placing the entire British countryside under quarantine, with immediate and inevitable consequences for rural tourism. We are told if we look back through the stats that it was about a nine per cent decrease in visitors from overseas an immediate drop.

Television newscasts provided detailed coverage of spiralling numbers of livestock infections and viewers at home and abroad, and some of you may remember, watched in horror as the UK countryside was denuded of livestock and friends of mine who lived in the UK at the time still say to me how they, it makes them feel sick the thought of FMD, the name resonates with them and they remember the stench of the burning carcasses. So, the impact on the tourism sector in the UK was massive and widespread with losses estimated at the time between £4.5 and £5.4 billion. The most severe impacts were for tourism mostly, on small accommodation, the most impact was on small accommodation providers, such as B&Bs.

Now the next slide I am going to show you is pretty horrific, it provides a little bit of detail of the disease and the pile of burning carcasses that I spoke about. So, if you would prefer to turn away now or just close your eyes, I will give you a notice when the slides gone again.

So here right centre we have a poor pig and you can see the blisters on his or her mouth and you can see bottom righthand corner the tongue of a cow with all the blisters and the tongue all quite pale and top left we’ve got blisters in the mouth of a goat. So extremely painful for the animals they get them in their mouth, around their teats, their feet, causes the drooling, hot temperatures, reluctance to move. Many of them do get through foot-and-mouth, you know your stronger animals will survive, weaker animals do not. Younger animals do not and it can cause problems in pregnancy as well. And there is a couple of other shots there of the need to move. So not only do we have to euthanise the stock quickly and carefully and as humanely as possible, they then have to be disposed of or moved to pits and then there’s that burning that I described before. I think that’s enough of the horrible, horrible shots.

So, for those who have looked away I have moved our slides along. I am here really to ask you to help us provide as much information as you to travellers. Send them our way if there’s anything that you can’t answer for them. You can see there on the screen it’s fairly simple; don’t bring meat or dairy products in your luggage back to Australia, buy you meat and dairy products – sorry – don’t buy your meat and dairy products from overseas. I do give a similar spiel on your garden seeds to, but focusing on FMD today. Anyone who travels to Indonesia, or any of the other countries, now Indonesia has an active outbreak at the moment which is of grave concern to us because they have a naïve population it is very difficult to control. By naïve population I simply mean that the animals themselves have not been exposed to the disease they have – Indonesia has gotten rid of this disease before back in the mid-80s they got the disease it took about 10 years to eradicate but the population there at the moment is quite susceptible to the disease and the virus is – the virus alone in the country, if you like is quite high. But there are other countries, there are 70 other countries in the world who have vaccination programs and are controlling foot-and-mouth disease, it’s not just Indonesia. We always have to be careful about not bringing back meat and dairy products from these countries, there’s other diseases out there that we saw before, ASF, Lumpy Skin Disease, you name it.

What we would like you to, on our behalf, continue to share with travellers, is that they avoid interacting with livestock or going to farms and if they do go to farms or they do go on a trek and ride the buffalo or whatever, great, but avoid – you know keep everything clean – wash all your gear if you really can’t clean it leave it behind and please don’t visit farms or rural areas when you get home, when you come back to Australia try to avoid going to rural areas for seven days. Before you return to Australia make sure the footwear and clothing that you have is clean and it doesn’t have to be you know, doesn’t have to be nuked, it just has to be clean. Detergent, your usual washing will remove the disease.

I can talk to you about the foot mats. You can see the foot mats up there on the screen. Those foot mats have got product just a loose – not loose sorry – a light, a dilute solution of citric acid, so it’s sort of like lemon juice, three per cent, and all that’s doing is giving you a film across the bottom of your shoe, just that extra layer of protection as you are walking off the plane and into the airport when you arrive back from Indonesia, from Jakarta or from Denpasar. You can also see a pair of shoes there that have not been cleaned very well and they would need to be. Always declare if you are concerned about where you’ve been, what you’ve been wearing, anything that you’ve brought back, just declare it. You declare, doesn’t matter what you’re declaring it’s a little bit like going to confession, you declare it, you’re good! We may have to take the product off you, we may have to clean your shoes, but there is no fine in place if you declare. The biosecurity officers are here to help you, but really it does keep the lines moving quickly if you have all done your bit, if everyone has been responsible and come home with clean gear and no animal products, that’s great and we shouldn’t have to inspect your luggage. When you sign your incoming passenger card you know the little yellow card that you get when you’re about to leave the plane, you fill that in correctly, read it correctly, it is a legal document. You sign it, we take what you have declared and we’ve got those records and it’s providing false and misleading information that gets you into hot water predominately. You may have heard about Jessica Lee, and her Subway sandwich, her half Subway, that she brought home from Singapore actually, she was fined $2,664, but she provided false and misleading advice on her IPC, her Incoming Passenger Card, she said that she hadn’t brought any meat or any food back and she had chicken and lettuce on that Subway sandwich which was pretty devastating.

So, please do direct people to our website, direct them to us. There’s hotlines, and we are very happy to answer questions, provide more detail and I look forward to seeing some questions, hopefully I can answer some questions now. Thanks Dee.

Deanna Emms: Thank you Vikki, that was some great information about biosecurity and FMD as well as some really important points for travellers. I apologise if anyone saw the, I will say images, and they did not want to, I think there may have been a slight delay. So, I just want to reinforce the really important message that there is no penalty if your clients declare any risk items, and if in doubt that is always the best approach.

So, let’s move on to our Q&A where you guys can ask Vikki some questions. If we don’t get to any of your questions, there will be information on the final slide giving some links for further information. And we also recommend that you ask your clients to check our website regularly, as it’s continually updated with the most current information. The situation is moving quickly, so always check.

Ok, let’s go to some questions Vikki. So, what are the types of penalties, and I think you might have mentioned this just a minute ago, people are receiving for not complying with the biosecurity requirements, for example bringing in pork products.

Vikki Fischer: Thanks Dee, certainly there are a number of penalties, there is a, a couple, we do start at the two penalty units, which is about $420, right up to 12 penalty units which is what I was describing with Jessica Lee, who brought half of her subway back from Singapore. It really does depend on what you’ve brought in and how much, and the way that it’s happened. And, agreed as Dee mentioned, there is no penalty if you declare, so we do say, dispose, declare, we’re really not here to fine people or put out infringement notices, we’re here to protect the country from pests and diseases. So, we can do that by putting the biosecurity risk material straight in the biosecurity bin. And there are, apart from, from travellers, penalties such as the infringements that we heard for the subway girl, but there are also larger penalties and criminal, we can take action for criminal or for crimes as well, where there is a worse activity happening at the border.

Deanna Emms: Thank you Vikki, and I also believe that we can and have the ability to cancel visas if they’re not a returning traveller to Australia so definitely one to consider there.

Vikki Fischer: My apologies, I did forget that one, and that goes for quite a lot of our visa’s, there’s 18 visas that we can cancel, including student visas and so those poor students who have paid their, you know, three years’ worth of, Uni and bring in food to last them for three years and include meat products in there will be sent home and won’t be allowed back to do their degree for three years.

Deanna Emms: That’s a really important one Vikki. Ok, we have a question from Dean Long and thank you for joining us Dean. ‘How do the foot baths work at the airport? Can travellers prepare for this before getting on the plane?’.

Vikki Fischer: Great question, thanks Dean. I’d just like to have a little correction in there. Foot baths are actually something that we use in abattoirs, in establishments where we’ve got people moving between livestock, getting off cattle vessels for example, people that are wearing, that are operating in those areas, are already wearing decent footwear, big heavy boots. And they are asked to walk slowly, through a foot bath, so a volume of disinfectant, usually a product called Virkon, you can look that up, you can look up the safety sheet on it. You certainly don’t want to get that stuff on your skin, it’s a very nasty disinfectant and what we are using at the airports is actually a foot mat. So obviously we are weighing up the risks here, to people, to our travellers, and to airport staff as well as the risk of any virus coming in on the bottom of people’s shoes. And what happens is, as you get off the plane, anybody coming in from, directly from an Indonesian airport, from Denpasar or Jakarta, direct flight into Australia, will be asked to walk across the foot mat. Ideally, your shoes are fairly clean anyway, most of us don’t jump on a plane with mud all over our shoes, but sometimes your shoes might be still dirty and we would ask that you bag them and take them to the desk, to a biosecurity officer, and we can have them cleaned there and then at the airport if you haven’t been able to do this before you get there. But basically, you walk off, you’ll go across the mats, it rubs the sole of your shoes so it cleans off any loose dirt and then the mat itself wets your shoe and you step off the mat and onto a dry area so that it pats dry and your shoe is then safe to walk on the tile by the time you’ve ended up at the end of the mat. So, we were juggling both the safety of our tourists or travellers and the industry when we put these mats in place.

Deanna Emms: Thank you Vikki. Speaking of clean shoes and equipment, how should we tell clients or travellers how to clean their shoes or equipment.

Vikki Fischer: It’s um, thank you for the good question. It’s a good question. It is, a little bit difficult, you know you tell your teenagers just clean your shoes, I get it, it’s not the easiest thing to explain. But it’s, do I have any visible mud, manure, organic matter, so your leaves or any of those sorts of things on my shoe. Can I brush it off, great, and if possible, grab an old toothbrush or a brush or some sort, some hot water and soap is great and just clean your shoes like that, that is perfectly fine. Pop your clothes through the washing machine with normal detergent if you get a chance too. That would be ideal.

Deanna Emms: Wonderful, thank you Vikki and for those looking there are also instructions on our website on how to clean shoes and equipment.

Ok I think we might be coming to the end of our questions. What about wooden souvenirs Vikki, is it ok to bring them in?

Vikki Fischer: Another good question, not quite on the FMD track so we’re not going to find foot-and-mouth disease virus living within wooden products, however wooden products even if they look lovely and clean and varnished on the outside and commercially processed they might still harbour the eggs or larvae of young insects within or other pests, there may be moulds or other diseases within the wood too, so all of those products, knickknacks that you see at the markets and elsewhere when you’re travelling. Timber wooden articles, bamboo and any products, please don’t bring back feathers, they must comply with our import conditions. You can look these up, either when you’re travelling or before you go overseas, a website called BICON and if in doubt, declare. Just show them to a biosecurity officer.

Deanna Emms: Thank you, Vikki. So, it’s great to see the importance of biosecurity being recognised and we really appreciate everyone’s support in protecting Australia. Um I think, Vikki, correct me if I’m wrong but the three big takeaways for today is, don’t bring meat or dairy products, clean all the clothing and equipment and if you do bring any risk goods um or if you do visit a rural area please, please declare it. And there’s no penalty.

Vikki Fischer: Exactly right, thanks Dee.

Deanna Emms: No problem. Ok everyone, unfortunately our time is up. On the screen we’ll have some links for further information and about how to connect with us on social media. I do note we did get a question about flyers and information, we will provide that information post webinar and it is also on our website if you are looking for it. Other than that, a reminder that today’s session has been recorded and will be published on the website. A big thank you to Vikki and Dean and the team at AFTA and everyone who has attended today for your time and engagement. Thank you everybody.

[Webinar ends]

**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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