

Industry preparedness and biosecurity

Michael Hartmann outlines the beef cattle industry's approach to exotic disease prevention and response

Abstract

As an industry focused upon exports, the prevention of, and response to, exotic disease incursions is one of the fundamental priorities for the Australian beef cattle industry.

This paper summarises the activities undertaken and mechanisms in place to ensure the Australian beef cattle industry maintains its reputation as a provider of clean, safe and disease-free product to the local and world consumer market.

Introduction

Beef production is Australia's most common agricultural activity with 35,000 specialist producers raising a herd around 24 million strong. While only producing around 4 percent of the world's beef, Australia remains the largest beef exporter with 70 percent of its production leaving the shore, reaping a value to Australia of over \$4 billion in export earnings.

Unlike most other beef producing nations, the Australian beef industry is reliant on its export markets for its continued prosperity (in the US for example, local consumers account for over 90 percent of annual consumption as opposed to 30 percent in Australia).

One of Australia's major strengths on the world beef market is its reputation and acknowledgment as a producer of high quality, safe, and disease-free beef. The maintenance and promotion of that reputation is one of the industry's key activities.

Australian beef producers are well aware of the devastation that an



exotic disease incursion would cause, particularly as a result of the closure of export markets. Consequently, the prevention of, and response to, exotic animal disease incursions is one of the fundamental priorities for the Australian beef cattle industry.

The lucky country

It could be argued that historically, Australia's freedom from exotic animal disease is based more upon good luck than good management. Up until the mid 20th Century, the "tyranny of distance" worked strongly in Australia's favour. Long voyages on leaky boats meant that diseased animals either recovered or died on route. That all changed dramatically with the advent of trans-continental air travel.

Today, around 5 million short-term visitors come to Australia every year, each being a potential risk to Australia's quarantine. Ten billion dollars worth of merchandise imports arrive in Australia every month, and every crate, boat and aeroplane also constitutes a quarantine risk.

Quarantine matters!

The importance of strict quarantine measures to Australia cannot be over-emphasised. To a country still largely reliant on agriculture, the consequences of an incursion could be disastrous. The first lesson was learnt back in 1872 when foot-and-mouth Disease (Australia's last outbreak) found its

way into the country. An outbreak of FMD today would cost Australia over \$13 billion (Productivity Commission, 2002).

The Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS) works diligently to minimise the risk of visitors and imports carrying exotic animal disease into Australia. Every visitor and their luggage is screened before entry, and every import is inspected before release. Visitors are educated on the importance of quarantine to Australia before arrival, and hefty fines and actions are applied to those who do not heed the warnings.

Nevertheless, while AQIS activities may minimise the risk it is impossible to provide a 100 percent guarantee that no exotic disease will ever enter the country. Hence, post-border activities are vital to ensure that any such diseases are quickly identified and eradicated.

It is not enough for Australia, and particularly the export-focused beef industry, to sit on its laurels and completely rely on AQIS to keep the nation clean. We must be prepared for the worst, and work on the philosophy of not "if" but "when" we find an exotic animal disease within Australia.

Not "if" but "when"

With that philosophy in mind, Australia has set in place an array of procedures and safeguards to be put into action in the advent of a confirmed, or suspect, disease outbreak. The AUSVETPLAN disease response manuals act as the "How to" books for Australia, while the ground-



breaking Exotic Animal Disease Response Agreement (EADRA) sets out the framework upon which a response will operate.

The EADRA takes the guess-work out of an exotic animal disease response, particularly in terms of which groups have what power, the composition of those groups, and importantly, how the response will be funded. This agreement has been signed by the Australian Government, State and Territory governments, and the representative bodies of the major livestock industries.

Industry involvement

Australia is somewhat unique in its attitude to exotic animal diseases in that both government and industry share the responsibility and work closely together both in the response itself, and in the development of the procedures, protocols and policy.

Cattle Council of Australia is the peak body representing beef cattle producers in Australia. Through its member organisations, Cattle Council is able to directly represent 70 percent of the specialist beef producers in this country.

Cattle Council continually represents the interests of the industry at meetings and policy

forums concerned with Australia's exotic animal disease preventative and response measures. The partnership approach between industry and government places Australia in an enviable position internationally in terms of the creation of a cohesive and working format through which to develop and implement required mechanisms for the national good.

Industry members are key stakeholders of the company "Animal Health Australia". Its role is to facilitate the creation, improvement and adoption of animal health policy and programs. It is a not-for-profit company established and jointly funded by the Federal and State/Territory governments and livestock industry bodies (see www.aahc.com.au).

Industry measures

As responsible members of Animal Health Australia and signatory to the EADRA, the industry organisations are required to take necessary measures to assist in the prevention of exotic animal disease incursions, while also setting in place appropriate mechanisms to allow quick responses in the event of an outbreak within that particular industry.

In the case of the beef industry, Cattle Council works to educate beef producers about the need for on-farm biosecurity practices, while also supporting initiatives encouraging producers to quickly report suspicious symptoms in animals. As the peak representative body, Cattle Council also has a lead role in exotic disease responses that involve beef cattle, and hence has developed its own "in house" set of guidelines to operate by during an outbreak.

Beef industry biosecurity plan

The Beef Industry Biosecurity Plan has been developed to drive producer awareness and adoption of practices that could prevent or contain a disease outbreak. Simple and non-onerous practices are promoted surrounding such areas as people and animal movements, sick and dead stock, and feral animals. These principles have been promoted through the development of a poster that has been distributed to beef producers throughout the country.

The poster incorporates the "Spot the Risk" theme from Animal Health Australia's continual "Protect Australian Livestock Campaign".





Beef industry EAD response plan

Cattle Council's Beef Industry Emergency Animal Disease Response Plan is a document that provides, in an easily digestible format, an overview of the national response framework, and, in particular, the roles and responsibilities incumbent therein on the organisation. The Plan also incorporates a series of "Job Cards" for each staff member within Cattle Council (from President to receptionist) clearly stating each person's responsibilities and duties during an outbreak. Each staff member keeps a copy of the plan close by, and an electronic version is maintained on the Cattle Council website (www.cattlecouncil.com.au). New staff are trained regarding their roles and responsibilities as per their job card.

Industry training

Cattle Council is also conscientious in ensuring it has a wealth of beef producers trained and available for instant action upon the commencement of a response. Through Animal Health Australia, regular training sessions are conducted where nominees from government and industry are accredited to work at various levels of the response framework. This ensures that competent personnel is available throughout the country and prepared to be activated not "if" but "when" they are needed.

Simulations

Industry was a critical component of in 2002, *Exercise Minotaur* that tested Australia's capacity to deal with an outbreak of Foot-and-Mouth Disease. Cattle Council was fully engaged in the simulation, and was a key player in the development and organisation of the simulation itself.

Significantly, Cattle Council and other industry organisations were engaged as evaluators of the exercise and reported back on the performance of the key components of the simulated response.

Conclusion

As an industry reliant on its exports, the Australian beef industry places enormous importance on its quarantine, biosecurity, and exotic disease response measures. Through the development of a working relationship with government authorities, the beef industry (as well as the other major livestock industry bodies) enjoys full ownership of the policies and systems that are developed at a national and state level. It is this working relationship that engenders understanding and respect, and therein the foundation of a rapid and effective exotic animal disease response.

Reference

Productivity Commission (2002), *Impact of a Foot-and-Mouth Disease Outbreak on Australia*. Research Report

Author

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