

Participatory emergency planning in AQIS—Integrated contingency planning, the AQIS experience

Greg Fullam outlines the practices and advantages of integrated contingency planning as used in AQIS

Australia's border is a highly dynamic operational environment, with many challenging events arising each year that require effective contingency planning and integrated emergency response arrangements. The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) works closely with industry, stakeholders and other border agencies to ensure Australia's quarantine integrity is effectively maintained during emergencies.

AQIS successfully responds to a wide range of emergencies and special events demonstrating the critical role that participatory planning plays in this challenging atmosphere. AQIS has longstanding integrated arrangements based on close consultations with industry to ensure an effective contingency planning framework is in place at the border.

Broadly speaking, AQIS implements the contingency plans developed with these stakeholders in three broad circumstances:

1. responding to emergencies at Australian operating sites that affect normal border processing arrangements;
2. participating in special events and occasions of significance that require modification to normal processing procedures, often at short notice; and
3. responding to overseas incidents that impact on the flow of material and people into Australia.

In each case, the plans aim to allow AQIS to respond flexibly to incidents as they eventuate, while maintaining quarantine standards.



AQIS staff planning a pest and disease survey in northern Australia

Emergencies at Australian operating sites

A range of natural disasters, accidents or security incidents can lead to closure of operating facilities at normal border entry points in Australia. When this occurs, the impact on border agencies such as AQIS can be immediate and fundamental.

Border entry points are generally built around considerable physical infrastructure, with the economic pressure of modern trade and commerce. The infrastructure is specialised to maximise the speed and efficiency with which material can be processed into Australia.

When highly specialised infrastructure (such as airport terminals or container wharves) are shut down, border agencies are faced with the challenge of maintaining Australia's border

integrity while also ensuring the continued entry of material and people into Australia, without the advantage of the specialised physical equipment integrated into the port infrastructure.

AQIS has worked with stakeholders to ensure that plans are in place to allow response to events in a way that maintains border integrity and is sensitive to the needs of other agencies and industry during such events. The operational plans implemented during such events are developed at a local level, working with the key field staff from industry and government partners. For example, formal agreements are in place with each airport and at international mail centres and are regularly tested with stakeholders. AQIS is a member of the top level emergency management committee at each airport and at international mail centres, and works with other stakeholders in incident response teams to implement the emergency

plans when necessary. Plans are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they remain current, and to reflect learnings from exercises and actual occurrences.

Broadly speaking, the types of plans developed emphasize the use of flexible resources that can be deployed in alternative processing facilities. Depending on the specific event, this may include the deployment of additional dog teams, the use of mobile x-rays, or changes to staffing arrangements to alter the proportion of staff available to process incoming material.

The contingency plans also focus on maximising the application of risk management principles to ensure resources are available and targeted to the areas of greatest risk. By developing the emergency arrangements in concert with other stakeholders, it is also possible to maximise the extent to which each agency assists the other agencies in effectively processing inbound cargo or passengers in a constrained operating environment. The cornerstone of this approach is the effective referral of material of concern to appropriate staff from each agency, and the co-operative integration of available resources by on-the-ground managers to achieve maximum effectiveness.

Staff from agencies work together to determine what alternative processing arrangements can be put in place given the particular emergency, and liaise with industry to ensure that information on the new arrangements is communicated in an appropriate and timely manner to all relevant stakeholders.

A critical aspect of these contingency arrangements is ensuring that decision-making processes to determine when incidents are escalated in seriousness (so that new phases of the emergency plans are activated) are clearly defined and well understood by all parties before any actual event. Having a clear

hierarchy of authority and an integrated emergency management structure allows effective, co-ordinated responses to emergencies at border facilities.

Regular simulations and exercises test these contingency arrangements, and allow AQIS to evaluate and adjust the detailed plans in place for each facility and point of entry. Regular reviews and discussions with partner agencies and industry ensure all relevant participants have a sound understanding of the contingency plans, while ensuring appropriate security arrangements are maintained.

Special events and occasions of significance

Australia hosts a wide range of major events, including official visits, major conferences and meetings of international inter-government bodies. These occasions can involve significant disruption to normal processing arrangements for a wide range of reasons, including the need for additional security for dignitaries (as with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting), unusual types of cargo, or large numbers of passengers travelling together. Perhaps the most challenging of these events are the major sporting tournaments, such as the Sydney Olympics and the Rugby World Cup.

As with emergencies at operating sites, AQIS relies on effective planning arrangements to ensure it can meet the challenges posed by these events. Many of these events involve significant numbers of overseas visitors bringing items of cultural significance (such as traditional costumes or food items) with them in large numbers, for use during the festivities. These items often pose very high risks to Australia's quarantine status and, as such, pose particular challenges for AQIS staff.



The lead-time involved in most of the major events and special occasions allows for dedicated planning task forces to be established, with representation from relevant agencies, community bodies and industry groups. For example, during the lead up to the Rugby World Cup 2003 ("the Cup"), AQIS participated in a Border Control Working Group established in August 2002 to facilitate information sharing between agencies and to address any issues arising in the context of contingency planning for the Cup. The group included representatives from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), the Australian Quarantine and Inspections Service (AQIS), the Australian Customs Service, AirServices Australia, the Attorney General's Department, the Australian Federal Police, the Therapeutic Goods Administration, the Protective Security Co-ordination Centre, the Department of Defence, the Department of Transport and Regional Services and the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources.

The experience gained during the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, and the close working relationship between the border control agencies for that event, helped to ensure that arrangements ran smoothly during the tournament period. The group agreed that the English language version of the Visiting Australia website, which was developed for the Sydney 2000 Olympics, would be updated for RWC 2003. Links to the site were included

on the Australian Rugby Union's official tournament website and the Australian Government's dedicated Cup site.

The working group also met representatives from the ARU's Logistics Team and shared information to raise issues that were later pursued by agencies on a bilateral basis with the ARU. Information on Australia's entry requirements was disseminated to team managers at the Team Managers' Conference, which was hosted by the International Rugby Board from 27 April to 2 May 2003 in Sydney.

Representatives from Customs, AQIS and DIMIA were given the opportunity to provide a direct presentation to team managers. In addition, Customs, AQIS, the Bureau of Meteorology and the Therapeutic Goods Administration provided relevant information for distribution at the Conference. The forum was an effective means of disseminating information to key personnel from each of the competing nations.

The movement of cargo for the World Cup, including team training equipment, was facilitated by special measures enabling targeted importation arrangements to be used by arriving teams. The smooth handling of this issue was aided by early contact established between event organisers and border agencies. AQIS inspected or X-rayed all team equipment with the majority of clearances performed at airports as part of the passenger processing of accompanied baggage.

Experience from the World Cup reinforced the importance of a number of key issues when preparing contingency plans for the smooth transition of visitors and equipment across the border during major events. In preparing for similar major events, AQIS uses effective industry and stakeholder consultations to ensure:

- contact between the border agencies and event organisers is established early in the planning process;
- normal agency operational arrangements apply to the maximum extent possible;
- event organisers are encouraged to provide, at their earliest convenience, as much information as possible to the border agencies on the travel plans of teams and officials to enable risk profiles to be assessed and resources to be allocated to facilitate the processing of teams and their equipment across Australia's border;
- where possible, event organisers are encouraged to provide the border agencies with information on expected international visitor numbers, including a breakdown by country of origin. (In the case of the Cup, overseas ticket sales were able to provide an indication of potential visitor numbers); and
- communication strategies are used to explain Australia's entry requirements to prospective entrants into Australia well before the event, through the use of websites and targeted awareness material.

Overseas incidents impacting on movements into Australia

A wide range of overseas events can impact on the movement of goods or people into Australia in a manner that dramatically alters the challenges faced by Australia's border agencies. Examples of such events include outbreaks of disease (such as the recent SARS and avian influenza incidents), natural disasters or major international conflicts (such as the war in Iraq or the conflict in East Timor). In responding to such events AQIS uses contingency plans to allow a rapid and effective adjustment to normal arrangements. This ensures that quarantine services continue to be delivered while facilitating effective entry arrangements for inbound goods and passengers,

including in many cases Australians being repatriated from conflict or disaster areas.

A recent example of the critical role of participatory planning in responding to external events was the activation of contingency arrangements during the aftermath of the Bali terrorist bombings. AQIS was required to be involved from the outset by ensuring that border processing arrangements were maintained without adding to the grief felt by those involved. This was compounded by the need for immediate and urgent clearance in many cases.

There were three main phases to the operational arrangements implemented by AQIS to deal with the Bali emergency. They were:

- Clearance of people returning to Australia who were physically injured in the blast and in need of urgent medical attention, or who were carers for the injured;
- People returning to Australia that were not directly involved but were emotionally affected or needed to be interviewed by Australian investigators; and
- Return to Australia of the bodies of those who died in the blast, and their families.

Charter aircraft were used to ferry those physically injured back to Australia. The prompt activation of effective contingency plans by experienced AQIS operations staff ensured that quarantine integrity was maintained while treating each situation with compassion and sensitivity. The contingency plans allowed AQIS to adjust normal operations so the charter aircraft were permitted to arrive at locations other than the international terminal.

In Perth this meant using an area at a small private company lounge on the domestic side of the airport. This allowed for family reunions, ambulance access, media areas, police checks, and inspection processes to be controlled.

AQIS staff worked alongside Customs and the Australian Federal Police to ensure speedy and compassionate processing occurred, while maintaining effective screening for material of quarantine concern. Emergency planning arrangements allowed AQIS to deploy staff members handpicked for these operations based on the special skills and training required for such events.

Even though visitor numbers to Bali dropped dramatically after the incident there were a significant number of people on the island who required quick repatriation. Although these people had not been directly involved they were traumatised by the incident. The Australian Federal Police implemented arrangements requiring all passengers arriving from Bali in the immediate aftermath of the event to be interviewed to ensure effective gathering of intelligence and evidence for future prosecution of the terrorists.

Given the nature of the circumstances faced by many of the returning passengers, special arrangements were implemented to modify normal arrangements to minimise inconvenience associated with paperwork normally applied to inbound passenger processing. For example, all fees for the treatment of imported goods were waived for all passengers arriving from Bali for three months after the incident, and staff were compassionate and sensitive in all interactions with affected passengers.

The most emotionally charged area was the return to Australia of the bodies of those who died in the



An AQIS scientist examines plant material collected from surveys to determine if it poses a risk to Australia

blast. On many of these occasions family members accompanied the bodies. This process was a drawn out due to the difficulty of identifying the bodies when in Bali. Once again AQIS staff carried out the necessary processing requirements unobtrusively, diligently and with a very high level of compassion and sensitivity.

AQIS staff worked with staff from other border agencies, airlines and airports to co-operatively expedite all procedures, without compromising the integrity of border control procedures. The wishes of relatives and friends returning with the remains of loved ones were observed wherever possible, and bereaved family and friends afforded maximum privacy. The effective participatory planning in place for such events allowed border agencies to ensure all possible efforts were undertaken to ensure the utmost dignity was maintained at all stages of the process.

Throughout the Bali evacuation and response, AQIS carried out duties in a professional and compassionate manner, which has become a trademark of the whole organisation. During and after the Bali response operation, not a single complaint was received from any source. This process is a testament to the effective implementation of emergency arrangements, developed through integrated participatory planning.

Author

Greg Fullam is the Manager of the Strategic Initiatives Team within the Quarantine Group in the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS). The Quarantine Group works with industry, other Commonwealth, State and Territory agencies and the community to protect Australia's animal, plant and human health status and the environment from unwanted pests and diseases. The Quarantine Group employs over 2,000 staff Australia wide, and has an annual budget of over \$200 million. Each year, staff employed in the programs within the group process almost 10 million incoming passengers, 150 million mail items, over 2 million consignments of air cargo and more than 1 million incoming sea containers.