

Exercise Odysseus: the national livestock standstill exercise program

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ABSTRACT

Exercise Odysseus, a series of more than 40 discussion exercises and field-based activities, was conducted throughout 2014 and early 2015 to enhance Australia's (government and industry) ability to implement a national livestock standstill in the event of an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD). Implementing movement restrictions on all animals susceptible to FMD is an important step in reducing the spread of FMD and bringing it under control.

Introduction

Australia is fortunate to be free from FMD, a very serious and highly contagious disease that could cost Australia more than \$50 billion over 10 years in the event of a medium to large outbreak¹. A critical activity in limiting the spread of FMD in the event of an outbreak will be to implement a national livestock standstill for at least 72 hours. A national livestock standstill would minimise the likelihood of further spread of disease while the nature and extent of an outbreak is identified. To be effective this needs to be implemented rapidly.

A national livestock standstill would be declared by the National Emergency Animal Disease Management Group (NMG) acting on advice of the Consultative Committee on Emergency Animal Disease (CCEAD). Under Australia's constitutional arrangements, the authority to implement and enforce a national livestock standstill is contained in state and territory legislation. Therefore a national livestock standstill depends on all jurisdictions implementing their individual arrangements in a consistent and co-ordinated manner.

During a national livestock standstill, FMD susceptible livestock (cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, buffalo, alpacas, camels and deer) must not be moved even if they are



The Exercise Odysseus logo was used extensively and assisted to visually link the various activities and the documents produced.

not showing signs of illness and the disease has not been detected nearby. Movement restrictions on animal products (e.g. meat, wool and dairy products) do not form part of a national livestock standstill but may apply in jurisdictions with FMD as part of their disease control strategies.

Under the existing protocol, the need for a national livestock standstill would be reviewed at 72 hours and a decision made to either extend the standstill or impose other types of movement restrictions.

Implementation of a national livestock standstill would be complex and would rely on cooperation and co-ordination across government agencies and industry organisations and compliance by livestock producers nationally.

Exercising the implementation and management of a national livestock standstill provided an opportunity to explore existing response arrangements. This included government agencies and industry organisations identifying where enhancements could be made and best practices to be encouraged and retained.

Previous national agricultural exercises (*Exercise Minotaur* in 2002 and *Exercise Eleusis* in 2005) consisted of a single activity involving all agricultural agencies and select industry organisations. These were functional exercises where national and jurisdictional co-ordination centres and some local control centres were established with a real-time scenario being introduced and run over several days.

¹ ABARES, 2013, Potential socioeconomic impacts of an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Australia, Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences research report, ABARES, Canberra.

In developing the concept for a livestock standstill exercise (*Exercise Odysseus*), it was recognised that to get the most out of this activity a different approach was required. Accordingly, the concept of conducting a program of discussion exercises and fieldbased activities over a 12-month period evolved. This enabled government agencies and industry organisations that may be involved in a national livestock standstill to conduct exercises specific to their needs. Discussions could be more focused and outcomes and lessons identified from each exercise used to inform subsequent exercises conducted as part of *Exercise Odysseus*.

Developing *Exercise Odysseus*

The aim of *Exercise Odysseus* was to enhance national (government and industry) preparedness for and implementation of a national livestock standstill in response to an outbreak of FMD.

The objectives of *Exercise Odysseus* were to:

- Assess national, jurisdictional and industry arrangements for implementing and managing a national livestock standstill.
- Assess national, jurisdictional and industry decision making processes in declaring and implementing a national livestock standstill.
- Assess mechanisms for communicating a national livestock standstill and their effectiveness.
- Assess co-ordination within and between government and non-government agencies and industry prior to and during a national livestock standstill.

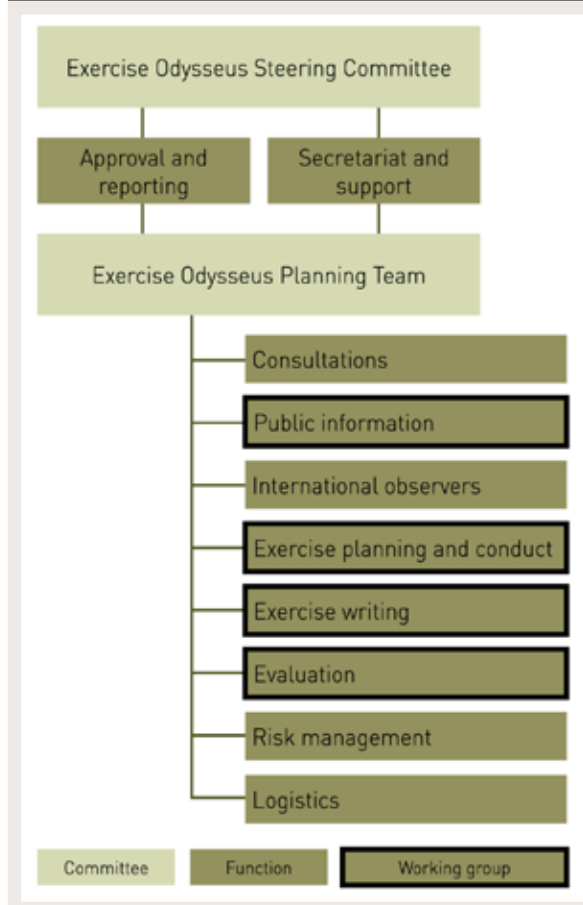
In addition, it was anticipated that *Exercise Odysseus* would enhance:

- the level of preparedness by government and industry to implement and manage a national livestock standstill
- awareness of the importance, role and potential impacts of a national livestock standstill among potentially affected agencies, organisations and communities.

It was recognised that not all government agencies and industry organisations would have the same needs and their objectives could differ slightly from those mentioned above. Accordingly, flexibility was built into the program so agencies and organisations could develop their own sub-objectives to exercise elements of a national livestock standstill that were relevant to their needs.

For example, the Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries had been working with saleyard operators to develop saleyard plans to guide implementation of a livestock standstill. Therefore exercises conducted in Victoria were used to evaluate existing saleyard plans to identify opportunities for improvements or best practice that could be incorporated into other saleyard plans.

Figure 1: Governance structure used to guide the planning, conduct and evaluation of *Exercise Odysseus*.



The Western Australia Department of Agriculture and Food used *Exercise Odysseus* to inform saleyard operators of the need to develop saleyard plans and to develop plans where they did not exist.

Being a complex, interwoven program of activities, *Exercise Odysseus* called for a governance structure that would ensure all activities were designed, planned, conducted and evaluated in a co-ordinated manner. Although the Department of Agriculture was primarily responsible for co-ordinating *Exercise Odysseus*, a steering committee, a planning team, and several subject-specific working groups were established to guide planning, conduct and evaluation of all *Exercise Odysseus* activities.

Three working groups—communication, scenario writing and evaluation—undertook work required to ensure that *Exercise Odysseus* was successfully communicated, documented and evaluated.

Agreeing on a common exercise management methodology early in the planning phase ensured that all activities were planned and conducted in a consistent manner. This was aided by the exercise management training provided by Emergency Management Australia at the Australian Emergency Management Institute (AEMI), which was undertaken by some of the planning team members either before or during the planning phase.



During a livestock standstill, livestock trucks may need to be diverted to aggregation points where animal welfare needs can be managed.

Communicating about *Exercise Odysseus*

National exercises can draw extensive media coverage. In anticipation of this, the Communication Working Group developed and documented a strategy for communicating about *Exercise Odysseus*. The strategy was designed to raise awareness of *Exercise Odysseus*, while ensuring that its activities were not mistaken for an actual outbreak of FMD. It was also used as an opportunity to inform government agencies, industry organisations, and the public about Australia's approach to managing the response to an outbreak of FMD.

The strategy included agreed messages about *Exercise Odysseus*, a national livestock standstill and FMD. These messages were used extensively by government agencies and industry organisations involved in the exercise program. This contributed towards consistent media (print and television) reporting on *Exercise Odysseus* and reduced the risk of activities being mistaken for an outbreak of FMD.

The scenario

To ensure that all *Exercise Odysseus* activities were conducted in a co-ordinated manner, a single national scenario was used. It was important that the scenario was realistic but not so complex that participants would be distracted by aspects not relevant to implementing and managing a national livestock standstill.

The scenario was based on an outbreak of FMD initially detected on a cattle property in Queensland. The scenario was set in the first few days of the outbreak when a national livestock standstill would be considered and implemented, as well as when decisions would be made to lift or extend the standstill beyond the initial 72-hour period. In the scenario, livestock and other movements from infected properties were identified as having the potential to spread FMD within Queensland and interstate. This scenario allowed the Australian, state and territory governments and livestock industry organisations to focus their exercises on issues associated with implementing and managing a livestock standstill.

Conducting *Exercise Odysseus*

Conducting a program of co-ordinated activities is a low-risk strategy, compared to one major exercise, in that the impact on the overall program would be negligible if one or more of the activities did not proceed. Despite a few minor logistical issues and a fire alarm leading to a building evacuation at the commencement of a national level exercise, none of the activities was cancelled.

Each activity focused specifically on one aspect of implementing or managing a national livestock standstill. These activities were conducted at national (government and/or industry), jurisdiction, local and agency levels.

At a national level, five discussion exercises were conducted. Two of these looked specifically at communicating about a national livestock standstill. The first focused on issues associated with communicating the implementation of a national livestock standstill, and the second on issues associated with extending or lifting the standstill.

The other three national-level exercises were conducted for the CCEAD and NMG. These activities allowed participants to practice decision-making in real time, using information that would be available during an actual response. Each of these exercises allowed participants to review their decisions, identify areas for improvement and practices to be encouraged or retained.

A number of national level industry-specific discussion exercises were also conducted focusing on industry arrangements for implementing and managing a national livestock standstill.

At a jurisdictional level, 18 discussion exercises were conducted. These focused on response arrangements, communication and co-ordination mechanisms in the respective jurisdiction. Some jurisdictions also conducted local level field-based activities. These included exploring issues associated with implementing a national livestock standstill at a saleyard on sale day when the yards were full of livestock (some regional saleyards are capable of holding in excess of 40 000 sheep). Activities



involved saleyard owners, stock and station agents, transporters, local government and others that may be involved in the management of a national livestock standstill at a local level.

A number of government agencies assessed their respective response arrangements and how these may be applied in responding to an outbreak of FMD while raising awareness amongst staff and executive about issues associated with implementing a national livestock standstill.

International observer program

Australia has existing arrangements with a number of countries to share resources during an emergency response. It also provides assistance to neighbouring countries in emergency preparedness for outbreaks of diseases such as FMD. As these reciprocal arrangements include observing exercises an international observers program was conducted as part of *Exercise Odysseus* and included 10 participants from nine countries.

The program provided insights into Australia's emergency animal disease response arrangements for implementing a national livestock standstill in the event of an outbreak of FMD. The program ran for three days and included observing the second national communication exercise, visiting a saleyard, and visiting Australian Government agencies and their incident management facilities.

Evaluating *Exercise Odysseus*

As with planning and conducting, evaluating *Exercise Odysseus* activities required a consistent and co-ordinated approach, developed, documented and agreed by the planning team and steering committee. The evaluation methodology was consistent with that being developed by other Australian emergency management agencies and shared through the National Security Knowledge and Lessons Management workshops conducted by the Attorney-General's

Department at AEMI. It was also consistent with the evaluation training provided by AEMI, attended by a number of staff involved in managing evaluation.

The evaluation approach adopted for *Exercise Odysseus* meant that each activity had an Evaluation Manager (a member of the exercise's planning team) who either conducted the evaluation or appointed and managed other staff to conduct the evaluation.

Independent evaluators, experienced in preparing for and responding to emergency animal disease incidents, were appointed to evaluate jurisdictional and national level exercises. These evaluators have previously held senior positions in agricultural agencies across Australia. The evaluator's observations and initial analyses, participants written and verbal feedback and the outputs from each activity were analysed by the Evaluation Working Group. More than 600 observations were recorded. These observations were grouped into themes, summarised and reviewed by the planning team to inform the final report being drafted.

Outcomes

Focusing on one aspect of a response for an extended period of time at a variety of levels (i.e. national, jurisdictional, local and agency) has had significant benefits to Australia's preparedness for managing a national livestock standstill and responding to an emergency animal disease outbreak. The exercise program resulted in government agencies and industry organisations exploring areas of preparedness that may not otherwise be explored. New contacts have been made and networks established.

Knowledge and understanding of how a national livestock standstill would be implemented and managed has been enhanced considerably. A range of issues that need further attention have been identified and are being addressed. Agricultural agencies recognise the importance of ongoing exercising and evaluation activities to ensure continuous improvement in preparing for and responding to agricultural incidents.

Exercise Odysseus was planned and implemented by the Department of Agriculture in conjunction with state and territory agricultural agencies, peak livestock and allied industry bodies and Animal Health Australia.

About the author

Tony Callan is the Director of the National Exercise and Evaluation Program, established by the Department of Agriculture in July 2013 to design, plan, conduct and evaluate *Exercise Odysseus*. Tony has been involved in emergency management for more than 30 years, initially as a volunteer with the NSW State Emergency Service, then as a District Emergency Management Officer in NSW. This is a position he held for eight years, prior to joining the Department of Agriculture in 2003.