

Friday 26th August 2022

Senate Inquiry into

Adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, in particular with respect to foot-and-mouth disease and varroa mite

Property Rights Australia (PRA) is a non-profit organisation of primary producers and small business people from rural Queensland who are concerned about continuing encroachments on the rights of private property owners. The organisation was formed to seek recognition and protection of the rights of private property owners in the development, introduction and administration of policies and legislation relating to the management of land, water and other natural resources. Set up in South West Queensland in January 2003, PRA's membership now extends across most states and all major rural industries. PRA is not affiliated with any political party.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the "Adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, in particular with respect to foot-and-mouth disease and varroa mite." I will speak about livestock only but it is obvious from Varroa mite, White Spot and other outbreaks that the whole biosecurity area needs an overhaul so that prompt action can be taken with the minimum disturbance to businesses. This is not always the case.

We want to be clear from the outset that our organisation believes that there is only ONE acceptable outcome with respect to FMD and that is that we keep it out of the country by all means available.

We support the government's provision of vaccine to Indonesia and the provision of whatever resources are needed to assist with the logistics to roll out the vaccines to as many herds as possible. We would like Bali to be the main focus as this is where most of the tourists visit and demographically, Bali is just one huge farm,"¹ according to Dr. Ross Ainsworth, a vet who has lived there for many years.

To those of us sitting on the sidelines response to the outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease in Bali in particular, was slow.

We all know how many tourists per week visit Bali from Australia. We also have at least some knowledge of what needs to be done. After much agitation the government eventually put signs in airports, messaging on planes and committed to a biosecurity officer on board.

Reports of seeing none of these things in the early days in particular, were numerous.

Livestock producers know the meaning of an emergency and the necessity of working all hours of the day or night to overcome such an emergency. It does not entail working government hours.

As it turned out government messaging was boring and incomplete. The onboard videos should have been visually confronting with images of the cattle culls of the 2001 UK outbreak or similar and fronted by a familiar popular figure.

¹ <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/expert-warns-foot-and-mouth-outbreak-in-australia-now-a-5050-chance/news-story/53d11f06cd18968489800b8c3ef1a011#:~:text=%E2%80%9CBali%20is%20just%20one%20big,back%20foot%20and%20mouth%20disease.>

As it was, they were entirely uninspiring with some interviewed passengers taking the attitude that they did not have cows so why should they be worried. Some did not want their holiday interrupted by border closures and some failed to declare they were on a farm even though they had been in areas occupied by livestock because they didn't want to queue.

Similarly, quarantine signs in airports, once they eventually made their appearance were bland and not confronting.

It took much agitation by the rural community to even get an agreement on foot mats.

At the very least they would have conveyed the message to tourists that something serious was happening. As it turned out we were in at least week four before they were in any airports and not all were covered at that stage.

Evidence given by the department indicated that the normal procurement channels were gone through.² In an emergency, we would have thought that an immediate call to dairy and pig suppliers to drop them and appropriate chemicals off immediately would have been more in order. Biosecurity regulation should allow government to insist on placement in airports with the airport authority involved in placement but ultimately, no right of refusal.

The cost/benefit of immediate action should have been obvious.

Inspecting, cleaning, and disinfecting shoes even where people were prepared and ready to co-operate was also not happening for far too long.

The so called "forensic profiling" of those who were to have luggage searched for, primarily, food items, based on how they had answered the woefully inadequate immigration form was massively inadequate. Dirty shoes and clothes were not even considered in the early days.

Considering that no borders were closing, a search of every bag should have been a priority.

Sniffer dogs should have been obvious in every airport with returning Bali passengers from day one and all passenger food imports confiscated. Sniffer dogs should have been in high-risk urban Post Offices immediately. This may have meant redeployment but that should always be possible. Post Office staff from rural and regional areas should have been alerted to have proper inspection of parcels from Indonesia.

It was a cause for great media attention when food was found in Post Offices or baggage. The big question though is how much was missed.

Governments of all persuasions should write into regulation that fines are increased substantially during a biosecurity emergency and publicised in a way that gets through to people. A sliding scale for an accidental tourist to an organised import is not unachievable.

Electronic billboards in capital cities can be utilised colourfully and promptly. Tourists need to be educated on the way to airports and on the way home. Environmental groups seem to mobilise their anti-livestock messages quickly and often. Governments should be able to at least match that capability. Employ professional marketers. Bureaucrats do not make good marketers, nor do farmers.

Advice from our levy organisations and representative organisations to review our biosecurity plans and not much else was gratuitous and negative. We all know what will happen if it gets into feral animals, a problem that has been allowed to get totally out of hand with National Parks being one of the major contributors to population increases.

It is disturbing that the Minister for Agriculture, Murray Watt seems to have taken advice that international evidence suggests that feral animals are not usually responsible for spread of the virus.³ There is certainly evidence to the contrary⁴ and just plain common sense. There is no other country where cloven-hoofed feral animals mix so freely with domestic livestock in plague proportions. That advice should be dismissed.

Quite rightly, many producers were calling for the closure of borders with Indonesia. These calls were exacerbated by the slow rollout of border security measures.

Border security measures are still not all that they could be.

Some landowners host other enterprises and government departments on their land. Official advice has still not been given not to go to rural areas or near livestock for 5-7 days after return from an FMD area. "The USA has a requirement that all travellers from FMD locations are required to stay away from livestock, zoo animals or wildlife for 5 days after their return to the US.

This is based on evidence that FMD virus can remain viable in a human respiratory tract for up to 5 days after exposure."⁵

Landowners need the power to stop entry from such people whether they are miners, government or some other authority such as a power utility. Biosecurity plans are treated by many such companies as a request, not a requirement by many such people.

Many of our members are rightly concerned that if FMD does reach our shores, reaction under the AusVet Plan may be late in being put into practice and an overreaction when it is. Destruction of whole herds on suspicion rather than a positive test is a very reasonable fear. Overreach will not be tolerated by a rural community already under siege.

With respect to testing, previous evidence from the Department has pointed out that taking of samples cannot be done by just any vet but has to be a departmental vet who may be required to go to a remote part of the country and the sample has to be put on an international flight to London.

Can a group within the department be tasked with ensuring that there is fast transport such as charter flights available on standby to any rural area to the suspect site to take qualified personnel and return to the nearest city and placed on an international flight to London. Then there has to be a logistical plan in place for timely delivery to the testing centre. It should go without saying that vaccines of the relevant strain should immediately be dispatched to the suspect site and surrounding areas. It should not be necessary to lay all this out, but actions so far do not indicate that timeliness is a strong feature of government departments.

³ <https://www.farmonline.com.au/story/7856913/feral-water-buffalo-pig-and-pest-fmd-outbreak-risk/>

⁴ <https://www.queenslandcountrylife.com.au/story/7871995/what-science-says-about-feral-animals-in-australian-fmd-outbreak/?cs=5706>

⁵ https://www.beefcentral.com/news/improving-biosecurity-measures-are-steadily-reducing-the-risk-of-fmd-incursion/?unapproved=313196&moderation-hash=6552624bf95f2cec4d30c9db8fc140fc&fbclid=IwAR1LCWstLc2EUz8xMvFoUvBHoZRugtVAAF_YfwlludxNpklw1r-pejFeGSE#comment-313196

Cost should be a minor consideration. \$eighty billion is a lot of money.

Early Detection and Prevention

Repots suggest that the risk of FMD reaching Australia has risen from 9% to 12%. That is actually very high risk for a disease with such far reaching consequences. Australia used to be a country which expected zero risk or very close to it.

We have had sentinel herds for various diseases in places such as Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and the Torres Strait Islands. Such herds, whether they were cattle, pigs or poultry, have not been made mention of with respect to the presently important disease of FMD and LSD. One has to wonder whether all the onshore sentinel herds (more than 90 Australia wide) are still required in such numbers or whether more resources should be devoted to South Asia.^{6,7}

They should be re-introduced where appropriate. It needs to be considered whether a discovery in a place such as the Torres Strait Islands would affect trade under our agreements.

Considering the risk of both FMD and Lumpy Skin Disease, not only should sentinel herds be reinstated but fully equipped large patrol boats should be re-tasked to the area for faster transportation of vets and quarantine personnel.

Summary

With the best will in the world, the whole look of the response seemed to be one of lack of interest with little from government politicians at all except the responsible Minister. Emergency measures on almost every count seemed to be slow to be approved and slow to roll out. We appreciate the efforts of departmental staff acting in unaccustomed roles. However, the virus does not wait, and shortcomings were obvious everywhere from the attitude of tourists, the waving through of some and the slow rollout of footmats. Some possible measures seem still not have been approved.

We also note from the evidence of Mr. Mettcalf, Secretary of DAFF, that evidence of FMD was informal until 9th May when Indonesia reported it to the World Organisation of Animal Health. This was a “trigger”. WE believe that waiting for a formal response from the country of origin before any measures are taken may not always be an appropriate response and may lead to a fatal delay.

We are always willing to answer any questions or appear at any public hearings.

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⁶ <https://www.beefcentral.com/news/sentinel-herd-to-established-in-timor-leste/>

⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2016-07-20/new-sentinel-herds-give-cattle-industry-a-biosecurity-boost/7640860>