

# National crisis communication arrangements for agricultural emergencies

*Howard Conkey considers effective communication practices during agricultural emergencies*

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## Abstract

A critical success factor for any significant agricultural emergency is how effectively governments and industry communicate to stakeholders. This communication must be undertaken prior to, during and after an emergency. This paper describes a number of communication initiatives undertaken in the agricultural sector including: a national communication network; pre-approved advertising material for use in a crisis; national telephone arrangements; a national agriculture emergency website; biosecurity education and awareness campaigns; and, a course to train PR professionals in crisis communications.

## Introduction

There is an adage in crisis communications that at least 50 per cent of a response in an emergency is communications. Most public relations professionals would argue the figure is higher, but whatever the final number getting communications right in a crisis is of utmost importance.

A critical success factor for any significant agricultural emergency is how effectively governments and industry communicate to stakeholders. Good quality, co-ordinated, well planned and delivered public communications substantially shape the willingness of the range of affected parties to assist in the task of resolving a pest, disease or food contamination problem. Co-operation from farmers and affected communities, trust by

consumers in response actions and market access outcomes all hinge on how well governments explain their actions and strategies.

*Exercise Minotaur* in 2002 and subsequent incidents have clearly demonstrated a number of issues that Australia had to address if it wished to put in place an effective public communications arrangement for a major disease outbreak. Much has been achieved since *Minotaur* to develop a more strategic approach to national communication arrangements and to develop tools that will help during an emergency. These include:

- the establishment of a national communication network
- the production of pre-approved advertising material for immediate use in a crisis
- national telephone arrangements
- creation of a national agriculture emergency website
- ongoing non-English speaking background (NESB) biosecurity education and awareness campaigns, and
- a crisis communication course to train PR professionals for a role in an emergency response.

## National Communication Network

One of the major lessons from the 2001 UK foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) outbreak (UK Stationary Office 2002) was the need to ensure consistency in public comment in order to maintain stakeholder confidence in the response to the emergency. The mechanism that

has been established in Australia for this purpose is the National Communication Network (NCN).

In 2002, COAG signed a Memorandum of Understanding on FMD arrangements (COAG 2002) that required each jurisdiction to identify a key communication manager. The MOU also committed signatories to consistent public comment from key spokespeople and to conduct media briefings. The MOU gave rise to the creation of the NCN, a group of 10 communication professionals drawn from each jurisdiction and including Animal Health Australia to represent the key industry groups covered by the Emergency Animal Disease Cost-Sharing Agreement. (AHA 2003) The network has developed into a powerful communication tool that has been used successfully on numerous pest and disease emergencies including Newcastle disease, anthrax in cattle, wheat streak mosaic virus, the Cormo Express live trade sheep consignment, BSE in Canada and the USA, and small hive beetles. Its strength is the degree of co-operation and trust that has been generated across jurisdictions and with industry in agreeing to and using consistent talking points, identifying key spokespeople, and in devising strategic crisis communication approaches to various issues.

The network is also an acknowledgment that in a large-scale FMD outbreak in Australia as many as 200 agencies may be

directly engaged in the response and the media could legitimately approach any for comment. The major strength of the network is that a small number of people can effectively co-ordinate the overall communication efforts of a group as large as 200.

For example, at the Australian Government level the 12 agencies that would be involved in a FMD outbreak are connected to the national communication arrangements by one person and in Queensland more than 20 agencies including the SES, Ambulance, Police, Transport, Health, etc. are again connected through the one representative. The network has proved to be so effective that it has broadened its focus to include plant pests with the involvement of Plant Health Australia and CSIRO Plant Industry.

### Pre-approved advertising material

The Australian Government has produced biosecurity ads that are being held in reserve for use in an emergency animal disease outbreak. The print, radio and

TV ads highlight what biosecurity measures producers can take to contain the initial spread of a disease and where people can go for further information. The radio and newspaper versions have been produced in Arabic, Cantonese, Croatian, Greek, Italian, Macedonian, Maltese, Mandarin, Punjabi and Vietnamese.

Designed to have a shelf life of at least 20 years, creation of the material now ensures that protracted production lead-times are avoided during a crisis and useful biosecurity information can be aired immediately on confirmation of a disease. The ads reinforce ongoing biosecurity education and awareness initiatives.

When an emergency animal disease has been confirmed, the Australian Government's "Matters of Public Importance" protocol can be immediately invoked so that the biosecurity advertising material can be aired in place of any existing Australian Government advertising campaigns. The material is expected to be aired for at least the first week of a confirmed outbreak and will be complemented by website



information, press releases, press conferences, phone hotline services, etc. The Australian Government and Commercial Television Australia has already pre-approved the ads, further clearing the way for their immediate use in an animal disease emergency. The advertisements will predominantly be placed in rural and regional Australia. The target audience for them include farmers and producers, service providers for farming enterprises (example shearers), other public including consumers, tourists and non-English speaking background audiences, vets and the media

### National telephone arrangements

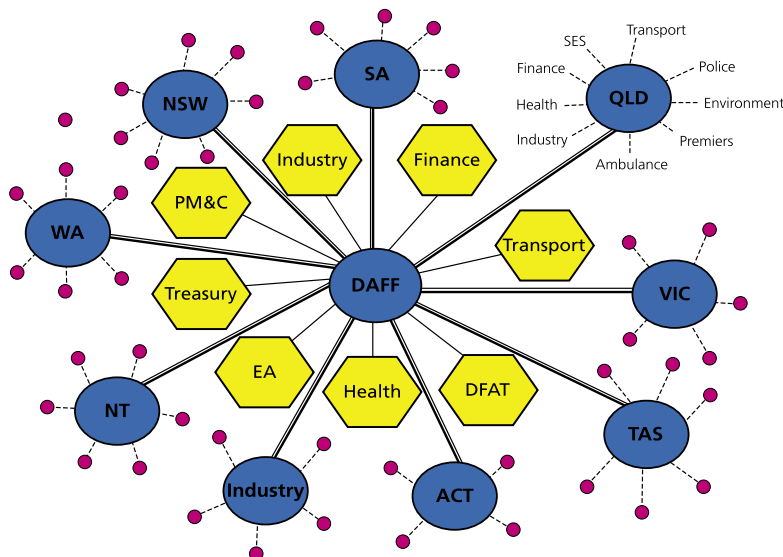
Centrelink has been engaged to provide a telephone hotline in the event of a major animal disease because of its extensive telephone infrastructure, the availability of 3,500 full-time operators, and the flexibility of its service.

Called the Emergency Animal Disease Telephone Service, this important public communication tool was deemed critical in light of the 2001 UK FMD outbreak.

The telephone service can be switched on in 30 minutes and pull-down computer menus that detail relevant information on diseases such as FMD in a question and answer format already support the service posted on the Centrelink intranet.

**Figure1. The national communication network**

The diagram illustrates how national communication arrangements will work in a FMD outbreak. The blue elements comprise the membership of the NCN, yellow a few of the Australian Government agencies that would be involved, and red some of the State/Territory and industry agencies and bodies.



This information can be updated in a matter of minutes and will be maintained regularly. A number has already been reserved with Telstra for the service – 1800 234 002 – and the availability of this number is highlighted in the pre-approved advertising material.

The service will operate between 8am–10pm local time, seven days per week, but could operate 24 hours a day if required.

It is expected a total of 200,000 calls will be made to the call centre in week one and this will fall in weeks two to seven to a total of 50,000 calls per week. The average length of call is expected to be 150 seconds and operators will require about 30 seconds afterwards to log details for tracking and research purposes.

Expected peaks from some rural callers will be early in the day and again at midday and in the evening. Urban callers are more likely to peak late in the morning. The service has been designed to answer 80 percent of all calls within 30 seconds.

Reporting on the number of calls to the hotline from each State is to be provided on a daily basis. Reporting on the number of calls by region will be available on a weekly basis.

Other types of reporting information will include urgent and important information, telephone call statistics, enquiry types, trends, and individual non-urgent call information. Information will be captured in a database to allow trends to be determined which will shape the targeting of specific communication messages to various geographical locations if required.

### National agricultural emergency website

The World Wide Web has developed into one of the most important communication mediums available for the quick and accurate dissemination of information to

stakeholders. The media make extensive use of Internet resources for reporting purposes as do others seeking more detail.

During the Newcastle disease outbreak at Meredith near Melbourne in 2002, trading partners informed the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry they were making decisions using Internet-based information rather than contacting overseas posts. The trading partners were subsequently critical of sites not updated on a daily basis. Experience with multi-jurisdictional pest and disease outbreaks such as Wheat Streak Mosaic virus and *Exercise Minotaur* indicate the Australian Government, States and Territories produce their own Internet-based information in an emergency.

While some of the information relates directly to specific jurisdictional issues, much of the material relates to common issues and could give rise to differences that would play out badly if publicly highlighted. Multiplication of effort during a significant emergency such as foot-and-mouth Disease would be a waste of scant resources at a demanding time.

A single national website – [www.outbreak.gov.au](http://www.outbreak.gov.au) – has been developed to address these issues and to be the definitive information resource during an outbreak emergency.

Features of the site include:

- An ongoing library resources that will access reference materials such as clinical symptoms, diagnostics, history of diseases, photographs
- Incursion status about any current outbreaks that includes:
  - Situation reports
  - Links to International, State, local and industry related sites
  - Information resources— reference materials (reports, reviews, mortality figures,

databases, fact sheets, newsletters)

- Media information containing print images, vision, audio grabs, fact sheets, transcripts, chronology and media releases
- Livestock movement advice
- Advice for travellers, exporters and primary producers
- Response and recovery information
- Frequently asked questions
- Subscription information— notification of when updates occur or notice of press conferences, public information sessions or when media releases are issued.

The site can feature any number of animal, plant and marine pest incursions at the one time. Importantly the site will also indicate if there are no current incursions.

### NESB biosecurity education and awareness campaign

The Australian Government has commenced a \$300,000 biosecurity education and awareness campaign targeting people of non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) involved in agriculture as part of broader pest and disease emergency preparedness activities.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the people from this target audience are peri-urban dwellers, engage in swill feeding and, through a lack of understanding and awareness, potentially pose a high-risk of introducing pests and diseases into Australia. This is the first time this group has specifically been targeted by the Australian Government on biosecurity and the campaign will focus on animal, plant, and quarantine issues.

The NESB campaign builds on biosecurity awareness campaigns conducted by Animal Health Australia, Plant Health Australia, industry, State/Territory Governments and the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service.

Heavily weighted towards face-to-face communication, the campaign is using word-of-mouth and informal and formal networks such as attendance at ethnic festivals and DAFF's roadshow to spread the message.

Resources have been produced in 10 languages including brochures, information sheets, websites, displays and posters. An audiocassette, video and radio series have also been produced.

The objectives for this biosecurity education and awareness campaign are to:

- generate cultural change to improve the biosecurity of individual farms, and
- educate all stakeholders about roles, responsibilities and procedures to be followed in the event of an emergency animal or plant disease outbreak.

Key messages of the campaign include:

- look for and immediately report anything unusual;
- check the origin of material coming on and off farms to assess the risk of disease and pests;
- create a "buffer zone" with neighbouring farms;
- do not feed food waste to production animals particularly swill to pigs;
- if dealing with suspect animals, clean and disinfect yourself afterwards;
- use seed or propagation material that has been certified "free from pests";
- do not bring in plant material of a favourite plant or variety from overseas; and
- tough fines of up to \$60,000 or imprisonment can apply to quarantine breaches.



### Crisis communication training module for public relations professionals

Crisis communication is a specialist public relations function and plays an increasingly critical role in the response to an emergency such as a pest or disease incursion.

To ensure that all communication staff involved in a response at either the national, state or local level understand what their role and responsibilities are in an emergency, an accredited training module for public relations professionals has been designed for a national roll-out. Course content features basic disease awareness, roles in control centres, response mechanisms and information systems. It includes information on powers, legal provisions, liability, OH&S issues, the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement, AUSVETPLAN, and a crisis communication component. The course is being offered for free in each capital city to those agencies that will be involved in a FMD response and it is hoped it will generate a pool of at least 150 accredited professionals.

### Conclusions

Agricultural emergencies necessitate co-ordinated national crisis communication. This requires the development and maintenance of government-partnerships, and communication activities undertaken prior to, during and after an emergency. Future efforts on the national communication arrangements will centre on developing a model to meet the large resource needs of a major agricultural emergency, national, State and local simulations to test plans, and to further enhance the communication efforts of a rapid response team capacity.

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#### Author

Howard Conkey is responsible for national communication arrangements for pest and disease emergencies both in terms of the response and preparedness. Major portfolio issues he has worked on include gene technology, drought, trade, and forests. Prior to joining DAFF, Howard was a policy and media adviser to several Federal Government Ministers, was a reporter in the Federal Parliament Press Gallery, and worked on a number of newspapers in rural and regional Australia.