

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).

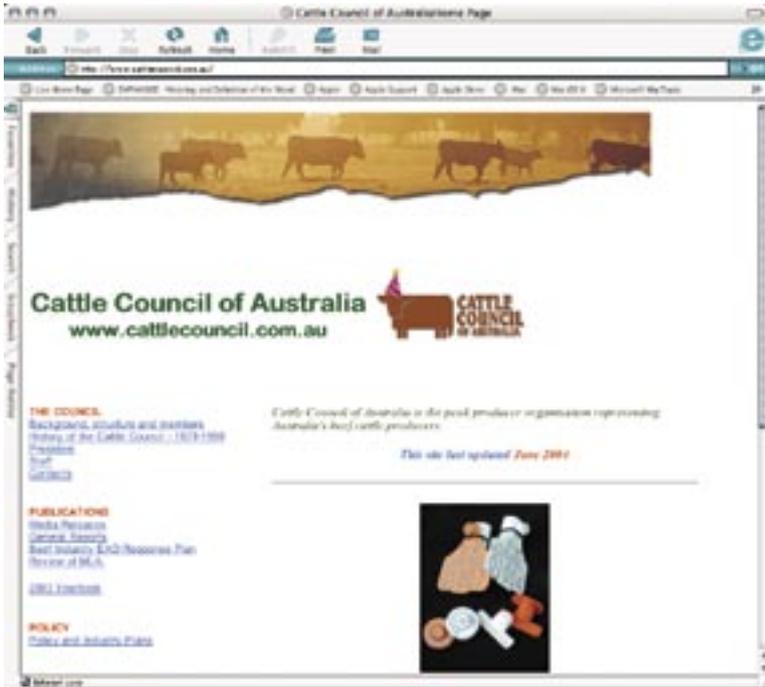
The Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS) works diligently to minimise the risk of visitors and imports carrying exotic animal disease into Australia. Every visitor and their luggage is screened before entry, and every import is inspected before release. Visitors are educated on the importance 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-



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

Michael Hartmann is Deputy Director of the Cattle Council of Australia, located in Canberra. His major responsibilities are in regard to the development of animal health and quarantine policies for the beef industry. He also has an emergency management background, being a trained NSW State Emergency Service and Bush Fire Brigade member.