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FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY

The biosecurity, health, trade nexus

The Crawford Fund 2021 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

QT Hotel, Canberra ACT, Australia
and Online

13-14 December 2021

Editor A. Milligan



Q&A

Chair: Dr Robyn Cleland, Dept of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE)

Panel: Professor Andrew Robinson;
Irene Kernot; Chris Dale; Tarni Cooper

Q: John Fazakerley, The University of Melbourne

I enjoyed those presentations. Thank you. I am thinking about [*Game of Thrones*] 'The Night's Watch' and 'The Wall' and all the pathogens coming across from the north. It is all very well keeping them out, but when they get here, how well is Australia prepared? For example, we have fewer high containment laboratories than in most other countries. We have fewer facilities to deal with actually characterising these pathogens. That is a very different issue, and one that we haven't actually touched upon, and I do wonder how well Australia is prepared for that?

A: Andrew Robinson

Exactly right, thank you, that is exactly right. A broader point, that I wanted to encourage us towards, is that thinking about the biosecurity system as a wall, or as AQIS at the border, is a disempowering model, and that we collectively need to take responsibility for the end-to-end activities. That includes appropriately resourcing science onshore, and ensuring that we have the best possible chance to defeat pathogens when they arrive. Thank you. I firmly agree.

Chair: Chris, do you want to contribute?

A: Chris Dale

Thank you for the question. Although I no longer work within the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, I can speak to the work that has happened in the plant biosecurity space over a number of years. We do have a list of national priority pests, and for those pests a whole suite of prevention, preparedness, response initiatives, including surveillance diagnostics response. There's a unit within the Plant Biosecurity or Plant Health Policy Branch specifically designated for plant health and plant biosecurity preparedness. So there is that capability. It is an evolving process, obviously, as new and emerging plant pests are found, and being able to keep up with the surveillance and the diagnostics protocols.

From a departmental perspective, in relation to containment and the necessary infrastructure, that is a multi-jurisdictional responsibility as well. However, to echo Andrew's point, it is a shared responsibility in terms of that preparedness, and we draw on not only the government and the NPPO, National Plant Protection Organisations, but also institutions, scientific research, the Research & Development Corporations, to support a lot of that.

This record has been prepared from a transcript.

Chair: Tarni [on video link], would you like to comment from an animal perspective? The question was: given the incursion of all of these biosecurity issues, does Australia have enough capacity, particularly for dealing with high-risk pathogens such as avian influenza, African swine fever, or indeed foot-and-mouth disease?

A: Tarni Cooper

There has been massive ramping up. The issue with ASF is that probably our highest risk exposure route is through pork products. There were some alarming statistics at the beginning of the ASF outbreak in China where huge numbers, many kilos, I can't remember the exact numbers, of products coming into our airports for receipt by the general public had to be destroyed. Sniffer dogs were trained. I was very surprised at the time that sniffer dogs were not always deployed in Darwin Airport. I like to think that dogs are there more, now, because we also have a lot of movement and trade going on through the islands in the north as well.

ASF is very resistant to heat and a range of treatments, so it can easily be brought in: some salami that someone sent from overseas, for example. It probably got into Timor-Leste because of people still feeding – that is, feeding their pigs on pork that was contaminated with this virus. I am not a member of the Government, so I can't say whether we have the capacity, but we have certainly done very well so far. We haven't had any incursion. So 'hats off' to the hard work of the Government.

Chair: Those of you in this room can see I have a biosecurity detector dog [soft toy] sitting up here on the table to remind us of their important work. I am not sure that we have dogs in Darwin at the moment. They are a limited resource that we try and deploy to the most needy area, and I think at the moment they are looking after brown marmorated stink bug.

Q: Phoebe Readford, Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness

This is for you, Tarni, and in relation to the question that Robyn asked Stacey earlier today. You mentioned that Timor-Leste is getting ready to restock some of the areas that have been affected by African swine fever, and we know how difficult it is to get rid of ASF, and how long it lasts in the environment. As a social scientist rather than a veterinarian, what are your thoughts on the risks and dangers of restocking those areas, particularly in terms of the impact on those smallholder farmers experiencing ASF yet again, and also in terms of the impact that then has on the trust that that government has spent a lot of time building up; and knowing that we don't have a vaccine for ASF at the moment? Are we prepared for that, or are we assisting the Timorese Government in being prepared for that?

A: Tarni Cooper

It is a great question, and I think you essentially answered it yourself. The concern definitely will be that these households don't have strong enough defences against ASF. We talk about, you know, the poorest farmers receiving these pigs, but in reality that there is no developed commercial sector in Timor-Leste. It is very different context to the Philippines. Pigs just don't have a safety

'bubble' around them; a lot of them are free-roaming still. I haven't heard yet via Dr Joanita about how they are hoping to overcome some of those challenges. I definitely agree that there's a real risk that any trust built will be dismantled, or the good work that has occurred through these extension activities will be undermined.

Also, there's the risk of the surrounding pigs being impacted as well, with ripple effects through the community. Dr Joanita said the pigs are coming from safe areas to safe areas, so there's a need to make sure, using tests such as these LAMP tests discussed earlier in this conference. We are trying to form a safe ring from an epidemiological perspective – a safe area where there are also movement controls.

But the challenges are enormous, so it will be very important to keep alert and keep talking to communities through the process.

Chair: Thank you to everyone.