28th of April 2008-04-28

Quarantine and Biosecurity Review Submission - Meat & Livestock Australia (Biosecurity, Animal Health & Welfare group)

This submission primarily addresses post border activities mentioned as part of the "continuum" in the terms of reference.

In general however we would like to make a brief comment on the border processes which in particular allowed for the introduction of Equine Influenza (EI) into this country. This is mentioned only briefly on the assumption that this will be fully addressed by the Callinan report.

It appears that some of the factors contributing to the EI incursion include the matrix management structure of AQIS and the lack of quarantine specialists (e.g. trained veterinarians) with direct operational responsibility for facilities. MLA would argue that matters as important as quarantine require not only management skills but expertise in the area and especially an appropriately qualified and trained officer in charge of each quarantine station with direct responsibility for that centre. In our opinion this would make it less likely for unacceptable relaxation in entry requirements to quarantine stations to occur. We do not consider it necessary to change the current arrangements with respect to BA, AQIS and the Product Integrity Animal & Plant Health Division of DAFF (paragraph 61 of the issues paper).

Post border activities:

A major weakness in Australia's biosecurity is the ever dwindling funding and resources provided by state governments to endemic disease surveillance. Whilst surveillance pre-border and at the border appears to be relatively well funded the ability of the state systems to recognise an incursion is severely hampered by the closing of regional veterinary laboratories, failure by most state governments to adequately fund veterinary and allied services and the introduction of laboratory fees for the investigation of herd and flock disease investigations. While a system of subsidies exist for various investigations of interest Australia remains very vulnerable to the situation of being unable to prove freedom from diseases because of a lack of surveillance. There is evidence that within the NSW laboratory system submissions for flock/herd conditions have decreased by 50 to 90% of previous submission rates. Some farmers now wait until many more animals have died before contacting a veterinarian due to their experience with laboratory charges.

One other result of lack of state veterinary infrastructure is that new veterinarians do not receive the "on the job" training provided by pathology feed-back and so are less able to provide good diagnostic services. With changes to the veterinary surgeon's acts in most states implemented in response to the Competition Commissions directives there are now less production animal procedures which the veterinarian is able to compete with as the "contractors" are not required to maintain professional indemnity insurance, local infrastructure or an "on-call" service. As a result those veterinarians who remain in rural areas are involved more in companion animal work and less in production animal medicine.

With respect to area C6 of the issues paper (research) our group in MLA is currently funding three collaborative projects. Evaluation in two of these (improvements in screw worm fly traps and a PCR for detecting *C. bezziana)* is straight forward as there are narrow aims which are being achieved and which will result in improved capacity to monitor pre-border, at the border

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and post border. However the larger issue of adoption of on-farm biosecurity and disease surveillance is much harder to investigate. This is partly due to the need for motivational research and marketing (not usually the domain of animal health researchers) of the benefits of disease surveillance.

MLA's animal health research with respect to biosecurity is conducted in co-operation with the Biosecurity CRC so there is some prioritisation and coordination of research. However this is an area where further co-ordination could be achieved. A workshop to discuss biosecurity research could be hosted by BA or the CRC and involve all bodies funding or performing biosecurity research or involved in biosecurity in Australia. If reasonable such a group or sub-committee could meet annually to discuss the progress of research and to examine researchable gaps.

We are not in a position to assess the emphasis given to risk assessment research. The MLA meat safety group as well as the animal health group are involved in risk assessments of various types but have not commissioned research on risk assessment. It appears to us that BA undertake risk assessments with due consideration for what science exists, our international obligations and the realities of the industries involved or at risk with particular import requests.

A large research gap involves investigation of what is required to improve both our biosecurity and animal welfare by stimulation of producers to initiate veterinary investigations of on-farm disease.

Whilst the red meat industry does fund research in the biosecurity area (with commonwealth government assistance) we are of the firm belief that there is a large public good involved in the biosecurity and as such both state and federal governments should continue to fund such research. State governments should return to funding disease investigations as one step in maintaining adequate infrastructure and should move to fund training and adequate remuneration for animal health specialists to undertake such investigations.

Recommendations;

1. Management of AQIS change to ensure staff with animal or plant health training have line responsibility for the operation of quarantine facilities.

2. State governments improve veterinary laboratory capability and staff training and remuneration.

3. State governments remove fees for herd and flock health investigations.

4. Government continue to fund research in this area and increase that funding

5. That a meeting of all bodies involved in funding or performing research in this area and other interested parties meet to discuss priorities for future research.

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