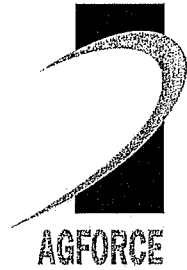


**AGFORCE SUBMISSION
TO THE
QUARANTINE AND BIOSECURITY
REVIEW**

30TH APRIL 2008

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AgForce is the peak organization representing Queensland's rural producers, which strives to ensure the long term growth, viability, competitiveness and profitability of broadacre industries of cattle, grain, sheep and wool in Queensland.

AgForce is not only an advocate for the broadacre industry's cattle, grain and sheep and wool producers but also their families, their communities and the wider rural sector. AgForce's wide and ongoing collection of member comments has been summarized in the submission below.

INTRODUCTION

Queensland's relative pest and disease free status is of the highest importance to the sheep, wool, cattle and grains industries and the viability of regional economies and communities. AgForce members strongly believe that quarantine and import protocols must protect these industries and their businesses from disease and pest incursion, whilst at the same time maximizing the opportunities for export trade by maintaining market access and adhering to OIE requirements.

In recent years there has been a number of high profile issues relating to AQIS and BA, including Brazilian beef imports and the breakdowns associated with the recent Equine Influenza (EI) outbreak. While AgForce fully understands there is a need to have a quarantine system which allows trade to continue, it supports this review as an opportunity to make improvements where possible.

In this submission, AgForce outlines areas of particular concern, many of which relate to cultural and structural problems within the existing framework which are illustrated by the handling of the Brazilian beef import issue and the recent outbreak of EI. Importantly not all issues are directed at Federal agencies as the efficient and co-ordinated response of State agencies is equally important.

The Acceptable Level of Risk Principal (ALOP) has been a major focus of such discussions, especially in light of the breakdown in procedures within AQIS that lead to Brazilian beef being dumped as refuse at Wagga Wagga. While AQIS and BA at the time believe the risk of an FMD outbreak from the import was extremely low, producers are most alarmed by the fact that there were procedures that were not followed in that circumstance. Given such a failure, and the apparent failures in procedure associated with EI, there has been debate about what ALOP means in the context of government agency application, and whether lower risk levels should be set as safeguard against failures. This discussion is in itself concerning, the potential that ALOP is further challenged and that domestic political pressure subsequently means non-science based protocols are developed may be a risk to export reliant industries.

AgForce recognises that the Australian government has to fulfil its international obligations under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS) in undertaking its risk assessments for quarantine purposes and the implementation of any necessary restrictions on imports and people and transport movements to Australia. AgForce also support the National Farmers' Federation position that recognises that the application of scientific rigour to quarantine and risk analysis does not always provide a definitive answer, and that a cost benefit analysis should be undertaken to better understand the benefits to a domestic industry and the costs to other industries and the economy from the application of the quarantine measure(s).

AgForce supports the position that Australia's quarantine arrangements should be managed in such a way as to ensure continued access for export of food and fibre products. AgForce also accepts that all sectors of the community, including government, importers, exporters and producers have a shared responsibility to apply sound biosecurity procedures.

STRUCTURAL ARRANGEMENTS OF FEDERAL AGENCIES

The current separation of BA and AQIS was designed to give greater transparency between the operational activities carried out by AQIS and the protocols developed by BA. However AgForce would maintain that this separation has only served to worsen the cultural issues which were already evident within the department, largely caused by a rundown of expertise and experience.

The new arrangements have resulted in both agencies effectively working in isolation from each other and this was graphically illustrated by the fiasco in the handling of the Brazilian beef import issues in 2004. In this situation there was an out of date protocol applied with little questions by AQIS after import permits were applied for without any reference back to BA about this issue. Whilst the actual risk in this particular issue may have been low, it highlighted a process failure which could have had major ramifications and put both government and industry in a needlessly exposed position. This demonstrated a gross lack of experience, expertise and communication.

As such AgForce is suggesting to the Federal Government that it carefully reconsiders the structural arrangements of these agencies. There is a school of thought that breaking them further away from government into statutory authority outside of the Federal Department of Agriculture (DAFF) may be the solution. However, events of recent years suggests that the opposite might actually be more appropriate in bringing them together in AQIS under the full oversight of DAFF to ensure a more thorough scrutiny of its activities and to drive better communication.

Regardless of structure, the culture within the various agencies remains the greatest challenge, especially in improving communication within the various operations sections and the experience and credibility within key divisions.

NEED FOR EFFECTIVE STOCK STANDSTILL PROVISIONS

One of the key learnings from the UK FMD outbreak was the critical need for effective stock standstill provisions. However nearly 7 years on it appears that Australia still does not have adequate stock standstill provisions in place as illustrated by the delays experienced in both NSW and Queensland. AgForce have some concerns about the effectiveness of current stock standstill provisions especially in Queensland which when tested did not provide a rapid response due to procedural issues which are yet to be rectified.

AgForce representatives are part of a consultative process managed by Biosecurity Queensland, the Stock standstill management group (SZMG). SZMG works as an industry-government consultative group to develop plans to address current stock standstill arrangements and assist with the planning and development of new procedures.

Queensland Veterinary Emergency Plan (QLDVETPLAN) is part of the Queensland Government State Counter Disaster Plan. QLDVETPLAN is a series of technical response plans that describe the proposed Queensland approach to an emergency animal disease incursion. QLDVETPLAN is part of Australian Veterinary Emergency Plan (AUSVETPLAN) which is administered by Animal Health Australia and is the overarching plan for ensuring effective responses to emergency disease outbreaks.

Under QLDVETPLAN a Livestock Standstill Zone (LSZ) may be declared as part of the initial response to an outbreak of an exotic animal disease. Legislative authority is provided by the Quarantine Act 1908 and Quarantine Regulations 2000 (Commonwealth) and the Exotic Diseases in Animals Act 1981 and Exotic Diseases in Animals Act 1988 (Queensland). AgForce have concerns with the legal mechanisms, which in the case of Equine Influenza, may not have been timely. Specifically AgForce understands that delays finalizing the

standstill order under the act meant that implementation of an enforced standstill (as opposed to a voluntary one) was also delayed.

The DPI&F is responsible for the declaration and management of a LSZ in Queensland. Under QLDVETPLAN the SZMG was formed, involving a number of state agencies, for planning, standstill implementation and management. The fact there are no federal agencies, notably no representatives from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF), is a concern given the need for strong planning if communication and coordination between agencies is to be effective during a disease response.

AgForce also understood that the LSZ was to be managed and coordinated by the SZMG, however in the case of the EI outbreak this did not occur. AgForce have had a long standing concern that the preparation for an FMD LSZ by SZMG has not been fully completed. Subsequently EI occurred with little of the formal planning protocols for other diseases being ready. AgForce are concerned that this meant individual agencies and groups did not effectively implement their own response plans in a timely manner. In particular AgForce are concerned that timeframes for compliance/enforcement work by the Queensland Police Service (QPS) were not initiated as quickly as was (again without the LSZ order).

The fact there are no provisions for specific LSZs in other states (the only standstill mechanisms being those in the AUSVETPLAN) is also a great concern to AgForce. Queensland livestock industry's biosecurity can be threatened by other contiguous states if these states do not initiate a timely and effective LSZ. There needs to be an LSZ which can be initiated by state and/or federal agencies prior to the confirmation of a suspected disease at a confirmatory lab. AgForce believe it would be far better to have a national or state by state standstill to prevent movements before this confirmatory test is resolved.

IRA AND PROTOCOL DEVELOPMENT

AgForce has concerns over the process of consultation by BA on Import Risk Assessments (IRA). Much of the detail in IRAs rely on the protocols being fully adhered to by AQIS. As we know AQIS have examples of either inappropriate adherence to outdated import protocols (as demonstrated by the Brazilian beef in the Wagga tip Incident), or that protocols are not followed at AQIS establishments (as seems to have been the case with Equine Influenza).

This has resulted in concern amongst many producers about the risk assessment process and the credibility of this has been tarnished by the process of their application by AQIS. In order to reduce this mistrust Industry groups need to have consultation on IRAs conducted in a manner which recognizes the potential problems in putting import protocols into affect. There needs to be a much greater level of active communication to potentially affected industry groups and business managers. Realistically there cannot be such communication without public notices and regular updates to interested producers. IRA's need to have a direct_ period for public consultation from producer groups. Such greater transparency ensures that the principal of Acceptable Level of Risk (ALOP) is better understood and more widely accepted by producers.

The development of independent assessments which can gauge the ability of AQIS to implement import protocols may be a positive way to both increase transparency in the process, and add more rigour to the management of protocols. AgForce believe that BA and AQIS need to have more direct information channels to potentially affected industries when implementing import protocols via the granting of permits. The justification for not fully doing so has in the past_ been that such matters are "commercial in confidence" (e.g. individual grain shipments may influence markets). Regardless of this "commercial in confidence" industry groups do need notice and a mechanism to provide specific information needs to be developed by government in consultation with industry.

Furthermore AgForce believe that agricultural commodity member organizations that are signatories to cost-sharing deeds of agreement with the Commonwealth and State

Governments must be considered as a special class of stakeholder for the purposes of consultation on quarantine issues as they have legal and funding obligations to meet in the event of an incursion of an exotic pest or disease due to a failure of Australia's quarantine system.

NAQS MANAGEMENT

AgForce have concerns over the mechanisms for AQIS consultation with industry on specific border protection programmes. In particular AgForce believe there needs to be better consultation on the management of the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS).

NAQS is a high focus activity for Queensland producers as protecting Australia's animal health along our state's expansive and sparsely-populated northern borders is crucial. NAQS involves a programme of monitoring, surveillance and public awareness across northern Australia and in the neighbouring areas of Papua New Guinea (PNG), Indonesia and East Timor.

There is also a very significant commercial aspect to the program's work as data collated by NAQS is (in conjunction with other programs under the National Animal Health Surveillance System - NAHSS) in satisfying our trading partners of Australia's plant and animal health status. To better ensure such market access requirements are met there is a need to discuss market requirements with Industry service providers such as Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) and Cattle Council of Australia..

However for the primary purpose of the NAQS (border protection) to be achieved AgForce believes there must be detailed consultation at an industry (through the national peak bodies), State (through the State farmer organizations) and agency (in particular between AQIS and BQ / DPI&F) level. This consultation is necessary if AQIS and other federal agencies are to plan activities effectively.

Queensland producers believe it is important that the mechanisms for persistently identifying quarantine risks to northern Australia and in close neighbouring countries through cooperative programmes includes a detailed consultation with industry at the national and state level. New consultation processes with industry groups at an oversight level are required if producer concerns are to be satisfied.

NORTHERN BORDER CONTROLS

The issue of illegal incursions in Cape York and the Gulf of Carpentaria, particularly associated with Indonesian fisherman has been an ongoing concern. AgForce has a number of members living in the isolated coastal areas who have provided first hand accounts. While it is important to note that the overall level of incursions has been reduced in recent years, it appears that they have become more targeted.

AgForce has received reports from members in the Cape that Indonesian fishermen have begun targeting the coastline over holiday periods when staff may not be available to respond. In one incident it is reported that an Indonesian fisherman established a camp on a beach in the Cape over the Christmas break and when AQIS was notified they responded that they did not have the staff on roster to respond over that time.

AgForce acknowledges that this is a difficult issue and a massive area to patrol, it does however represent a significant concern to our biosecurity, given the extremely high risk of an FMD incursion from animals on such boats. Furthermore communications to producers on the responses of federal agencies is needed.

POST BORDER RESPONSES BY STATE AGENCIES

AgForce also has concerns over the adequacy of DPI&F / BQ staff located in regional areas. There are a number of concerns from members, largely detailed in the recent DPI&F consultation conducted by JTA, which stem from producers finding it difficult to obtain the service of state agency staff capable of diagnosing an EAD or capable of managing EAD incursion. These concerns are particularly prevalent at a local level in western and northern Queensland. At a state wide level AgForce has concerns over the adequacy of resourcing to enact EAD response plans, especially given the resourcing challenges now being faced by BQ. State departments need adequate funding to carry out their day to day activities whilst at the same time managing a crisis, whether it be an EAD or pest incursion.

The EI outbreak has demonstrated that there has been a reduction in the technical skills of BQ / DPI&F staff in the regions, linkages with industry and overall capacity. That requirement for technical knowledge is critical to sound biosecurity and quarantine processes. BQ need increased funding to implement both a specific disease control centre (with adequate staffing) and to increase their funding for the stock inspectors and local departmental vets. In addition there needs to be a whole range of departmental processes to ensure that corporate memory, especially important when experience of managing EAD responses, is retained. In part, this can be achieved by ensuring proper hand-over periods for more senior staff as they are replaced, and also by active training (such as deployment of staff to foreign EAD responses, as occurred during the 2001 UK FMD outbreak) to review and learn from the systems in place in other countries.

ILO TRAINING

AgForce strongly believes that there is a crucial industry representative role in an emergency response. The Local Disease Control Centres (LDCC) under AUSVETPLAN requires Industry Liaison Officers (ILOs) to assist in any EAD response. The roles of the ILOs includes provision of advice on the nature of the local industry to assist with disease risk assessment, assistance with developing and implementing plans for disease eradication/control, providing advice on the economic and other consequences of proposed actions and, in conjunction with local SFO staff members acting as a focus for consultation and advice to the local industry

Between 2004 and 2006 ILO workshops were funded by the federal government to help ILO trainees gain an understanding of the principles and practice of EAD response, the responsibilities and requirements of their role and the limitations of their role. Since 2007 AgForce have worked with AHA and identified serious gaps in the areas serviced by ILOs. Two of the five regions of Queensland (the Southern Inland Queensland and South West regions) have no cattle industry ILO's whilst there are no sheep industry ILOs in the state. Given the potential threat to the entire industry if this situation is continued, AgForce urge the federal government to immediately fund at least 2 additional workshops to allow this gap to be filled, and to work with Peak Bodies to examine other gaps.

It is also vital that AHA, BQ and DAFF establish an ongoing consultation process with various industry sectors to ensure that communication processes are kept current. Many of the processes which were put in place post FMD in the UK have become redundant as government has not kept in consultation with industry over this period.