

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION FROM AFFA FOR JCPAA

ISSUE

The IRA backlog

The Committee understands there is a significant number of IRAs needing to be processed.

- How many IRAs remain to be completed?
- How does this compare with the number of IRAs being received annually?
- Are there plans to reduce any backlog in the number of IRAs?
- What are the impediments to reducing the backlog?
- It has been suggested that some IRAs be fast-tracked, especially those involving countries which may be in (or contemplating entering into) free trade negotiations with Australia. How do you respond to this suggestion?

BACKGROUND

- **How many IRAs remain to be completed?**

Biosecurity Australia has 46 IRAs currently proceeding.

In addition, there are 165 animal and plant access requests awaiting consideration. A number of these may not proceed, due to changing priorities by the country or person requesting access or lack of necessary scientific information on pests and diseases. Others may be dealt with as a review of policy rather than a full IRA, or aggregated and done as a generic analysis. Biosecurity Australia estimates that only around 70-80 of these requests will result in a full IRA.

- **How does this compare with the number of IRAs being received annually?**

The number of import access requests received varies from year to year. Eleven were received in 2001 and nine to date in 2002. In some previous years the number received was considerably higher (eg 22 in 1993, 23 in 2000). However, the earlier figures included informal expressions of interest as well as formal requests. Biosecurity Australia now requires a detailed application that helps ensure the request is genuine. The recent figures are therefore considered to be more representative of the actual level of interest.

- **Are there plans to reduce any backlog in the number of IRAs?**

The review of the IRA Framework has led to some proposed changes which are expected to help ease potential delays in the IRA process, by identifying and handling any technical concerns of stakeholder earlier in the process. However, the size of the backlog is directly related to the speed with which IRAs can be dealt with. This depends on a number of factors including the resources available (availability suitably qualified external experts in addition to Biosecurity Australia staff), the complexity of the IRA (eg the number and type of pests and diseases that need to be considered), the availability of published or other information necessary to support the analysis, and the quality, completeness and timing of responses by the proponent country to requests for information.

- **What are the impediments to reducing the backlog?**

The main impediments are finite resources and in some cases, lack of essential information due either to deficiencies in the available scientific knowledge or to delays in obtaining from the country or countries concerned the necessary information on pests and diseases relevant to a particular IRA.

Biosecurity Australia has resources to undertake an average of 45-50 IRAs at any one time – this number includes several that are worked on intermittently, at times when higher priority ones cannot be progressed.

- **It has been suggested that some IRAs be fast-tracked, especially those involving countries which may be in (or contemplating entering into) free trade negotiations with Australia. How do you respond to this suggestion?**

Biosecurity Australia conducts IRAs according to a published, structured and transparent process. Biosecurity Australia is required by Government policy, domestic legislation and international obligations, to develop policy that is conservative, consistent and science based. There is not scope to fast track IRAs and Australia has made it clear that it will not be negotiating on quarantine issues or agreeing to settlement of quarantine issues as a precondition for negotiations of free trade arrangements.

Supplementary Information from AFFA For jcpaa

ISSUE

Exercise Minotaur

BACKGROUND

1 What lessons have been learnt from Exercise Minotaur?

A full assessment of the outcomes of Exercise Minotaur has yet to be completed. A report is expected to be available for presentation to the Council of Australian Governments, the commissioning body for the exercise, by the end of November 2002.

- How did the level of available veterinary expertise cope in the simulation?

See above.

- How did the inter-governmental lines of communication perform across the jurisdictions involved?

See above.

- Will there be follow up exercises?

The Primary Industries Ministerial Council has agreed that, in light of lessons learned from Exercise Minotaur and the importance of maintaining emergency animal disease response capabilities, a five-year rolling plan be prepared that would include a future major national exercise in 3-4 years time with mini-exercises to be held each year to test individual components of the system. This plan will be developed for presentation at the next meeting of the Council, scheduled for April 2003.

- Are there plans to model other outbreak scenarios, such as an outbreak in the Torres Strait/Cape York Peninsula region?

See answer to previous question. It should be noted that the Queensland government facilitated an emergency animal disease field exercise (Exercise Wild Thing) in October last year. It focused particularly on feral animal control and was conducted in north Queensland.

- How will feral animal disease vectors be controlled in the case of a 'real' FMD outbreak?

The need to assess the control of potential feral animal vectors would be assessed a case-by-case basis. If there is a need in any particular location to control feral animals, this would be done in accordance with the principles and procedures set out in the *Wild Animal Management Manual* of the Australian Veterinary Emergency Plan (Ausvetplan).

- Will the development of new vaccines allow Australia to, in the future, adopt a non-cull (or partial cull) response to FMD outbreak? (See Foot and mouth needs strategy, *New Scientist*, 20 July 2002, p. 10).

From a technical perspective, the development of new vaccines and diagnostic tests offers opportunities for strategic use of vaccination that could reduce the number of animals which have to be destroyed in an outbreak response. Recent changes to international guidelines mean that the trade effects of using vaccination may not be as severe as applied in the past and many countries are re-evaluating their approaches to the use of vaccination. However, although such developments are currently being scientifically validated, it is likely that it will be some time before they result in the policy changes (by both individual trading partners and international organisations that set relevant guidelines and standards) that would enable the full realisation of the opportunities to reduce the number of animals that might have to be destroyed in response to an outbreak of FMD.

- What are the costs and benefits of a non-cull (or partial cull) response to a FMD outbreak?

The costs and benefits of the various options available are a function of the specific circumstances of each outbreak and need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Even the limited modelling studies undertaken in Australia have identified scenarios in which, for example, a vaccination response has clear advantages over a stamping-out response, and the reverse. Factors that influence the outcome include the density and species of livestock in the infected area, that strain of virus (in terms of both host range and infectivity), the availability of an effective and safe vaccine for the strain involved, season and environmental conditions (for some strains), the size of the outbreak and availability of resources, and environmental and welfare concerns. The expectations of key trading partners may also influence the costs and benefits of response options. Although Australia may regard a particular response option as the most appropriate, this may not be acceptable to major trading partners and an alternative option may have to be pursued to minimise the time until regaining export market access. All economic studies on the potential impact of an outbreak of FMD in Australia have shown that the costs associated with loss of export markets far outweigh the direct costs of control and eradication.

- Has the exercise provided insights into possible response strategies to outbreaks of other exotic diseases?

A wide range of lessons will be drawn from Exercise Minotaur. Most of these will be pertinent to the management of large emergency animal disease responses more generally. As specific outcomes from the exercise are still being collated, these broader insights cannot be fully identified at this time.