

Senator HEFFERNAN—But in that contingency plan you would still leave the meat on the shelves that is there?

Dr Biddle—As I mentioned before, that would be dependent on the circumstances around a particular event. Certainly it could be attached that it was a delimited event and that the amount of risk material had been tied up in the control measures taken.

Senator HEFFERNAN—So in the meat cycle—the shelf life of the meat—how long does it take to make that determination to send the thing offshore to get it tested? Does it take a week or two days or two weeks? How long does it take you to arrive at the decision whether you should remove the meat from the shelves?

Dr Biddle—The initial diagnosis and confirmation should be fairly rapidly accomplished through the high-security laboratory at Geelong and then a few days to get that confirmed overseas. But the investigation—the delimiting testing—that might then need to follow, depending on the history around the animal that was diagnosed, could take some little time. But it is very difficult to say that in advance. It is dependent on the circumstances of the history of the animal in which the initial diagnosis was made. It may have a particular set of risk factors that means that it is an isolated event or relatively isolated.

Senator HEFFERNAN—I hate to say this. I think I will have to surrender. If there was a reactor that came through the Wagga saleyards and one of the butchers there was buying meat out of the Wagga saleyards, if I were a consumer in Wagga I would be pretty wary about going to the supermarket to buy meat when it came over the news there was a BSE reactor. Bear in mind that our testing regime is very light touch.

Dr Biddle—I think we have a very good—

Senator HEFFERNAN—Yes, we target.

Dr Biddle—A good diagnostic capacity within this country.

Senator HEFFERNAN—I agree with that.

Dr Biddle—And a good surveillance system. I think our traceability systems would allow us to get on to the job pretty quickly and—

Senator HEFFERNAN—I agree with that.

Dr Biddle—help to find the origin of the animal and, therefore, the risk factors around that animal and its herd of origin.

Senator HEFFERNAN—So if I went to Turvy Tops butchery I would just proceed as normal?

Dr Biddle—We would trust that our plans and procedures would be able to restore consumer confidence very rapidly.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Forget all that now. I just want to get a bit of an update to give me something to think about when I have got nothing else to think about. Where are we up to in terms of protecting our sovereign boundaries from an incursion, given the lack of supervision in some areas of the north? Is that a question you fellows can answer?

Dr Biddle—About our changing quarantine risks—is that a—

Senator HEFFERNAN—Yes. Obviously, if we have tens of thousands of feral cattle that are not tagged, that are not supervised, that are not fenced, what is the longer term plan to absolutely secure Australia's quarantine boundary from someone coming across in a canoe, as it were, or a fisherman landing on the beach, having a feed and leaving rubbish there for a pig to eat and take down to the paddock to the cattle or something? Given that there are thousands of cattle in the north that are still unsupervised and not subject to an NLIS, is there a plan to bring all of those areas under supervision and get a tag in their ear?

Dr Biddle—I did hear your questions earlier and, of course, they cut across a number of programs. I believe that mention was made about the Northern Australian Quarantine Strategy and other systems providing early warning. Within Australia there are surveillance systems that are designed to detect the emergence of disease, and hopefully that is done at an early stage. This country has just come out of, as you know, a very extensive tuberculosis eradication program, the final stages of which were conducted in Northern Australia. The knowledge and ability to control the northern extensive beef herds were enhanced off the back of that program. The beef roads program et cetera mean that we are far less of a frontier than we used to be.

Senator HEFFERNAN—I accept that, and we did actually destock a lot of country—

Dr Biddle—That is right.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Newcombar and places like that—

Dr Biddle—And succeeded in eradicating that disease.

Senator HEFFERNAN—However, at the present time, there is a new herd of feral cattle out there in the bush.

Dr Biddle—The provision of the ongoing surveillance systems is key. In terms of marketing cattle, as you say, that might be harvested out of relatively uncontrolled country, as I understand it the exemptions under NLIS no longer apply and animals being moved off those properties that might be harvested have to be tagged before they go to the abattoir. So there is a system of traceability. Whether unusual disease is detected in those animals at the slaughter process or during the handling and movement to slaughter, there are systems and there is obviously awareness of particular risks within the state animal health services that may have some of these extensive herds.

Senator HEFFERNAN—But my problem is that there is some country up there—millions of acres—that does not get mustered; it is just some sort of casual wild cattle catch. You could actually have something inadvertent occur there and it would not come to anyone's attention for 12 months. Do you reckon it would be a worthwhile exercise, as I suggested earlier, to do a—what was the name of the thing we did down here?

Mr Aldred—An exercise, Minotaur style.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Yes—say, in the gulf, in the cape or somewhere and just see how you get on?

Dr Biddle—Yes. In fact, such exercises have occurred in Queensland and one is occurring this year in the Northern Territory, involving wild pigs in relation to the disease classical swine fever.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Yes, but I was thinking more of something like foot-and-mouth.

Dr Biddle—Yes. You mentioned the role of feral pigs, wild pigs, before. This is an exercise with a slightly different but also highly contagious disease. I think all these exercises lead to building up of experience and knowledge.

Senator HEFFERNAN—So how do you get rid of 800,000 feral pigs?

Dr Biddle—In our response plans—we may have had a little discussion about this some years back—it is not necessary, in order to control a disease outbreak, to eradicate—

Senator HEFFERNAN—Yes, I appreciate that.

Dr Biddle—the feral animal population, but in some circumstances suppression of their numbers may be needed. In others there may not be any overlap between the vector and—

Senator HEFFERNAN—You will agree, I hope, that it would be very difficult to establish. In the event of a foot-and-mouth outbreak in Australia, it would be reasonably difficult to establish a foot-and-mouth-free zone with a serious load of feral pigs in the country. They do not stop at the gate overnight; they move.

Dr Biddle—The risks will vary across the country, dependant on the wild pig density and the degree of overlap with the cattle or sheep industries. Those factors are being worked on and factored into our planning. It is a complexity, but you do not need zero density of these vector animals in order to control the disease. In fact, the UK outbreak was controlled despite involvement of risk factors—in wild deer, for example.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Yes, but we are a lot less supervised than Great Britain, in terms of 17 million hectares at Cape York.

Dr Biddle—We do have a spectrum of cattle densities and other animal densities—yes.

Senator HEFFERNAN—All right, I would just like to think that we could sow the seed somewhere in the department that we should, for the sake of some further national benefit, do an exercise up there and see how we get on. Thanks.

CHAIR—Are there any other questions for AQIS?

Senator SCULLION—If NAQS falls under AQIS, yes I have. I have some on bees, NAQS and cane toads.

CHAIR—I can tell you now that cane toads are a responsibility of the states and territories.

Senator SCULLION—A quick question on cane toads: are you doing any work at all on cane toads?

Dr O'Connell—The issue is really managed through the environment department.

Senator SCULLION—Yes, but is the department doing any work on them?