

Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity

Supplementary submission from the Australian Veterinary Association Ltd
Queensland specific comments July 20 2016



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IGAB Review

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The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. Our 8500 members come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, such as cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

Summary

Biosecurity for animal diseases in Queensland is significantly less resourced than 25 years ago. While there have been improvements in the area of better diagnostic tests including PCR technology, electronic databases that can be shared across the nation in moments and mobile satellite phones allowing more real time reporting, the overall surveillance coverage has shrunk. In a time of acknowledged higher biosecurity risks due to international travel and global trade movements, the overall impact of this is that Queensland is more vulnerable to a disease outbreak which can cause the economy to suffer serious setbacks. The main changes and proposed recommendations are outlined below.

General Comments

Reduction from 4 government laboratories to a single centralized laboratory

Cost: In the early 1990's, the cost of operating a central veterinary laboratory and 3 regional laboratories in Qld was \$6 million. The average weekly wage has trebled since 1990 and as staff costs make up the majority of expenses in government organisations, it is expected that today's investment in biosecurity, if unchanged, would be also be significantly higher. However, the contraction from 4 regional laboratories to one single centralized laboratory suggests that the government has significantly decreased its investment in diagnostic services for Queensland livestock, thus leaving vast areas of the state vulnerable and poorly serviced.

Impact: The major impact of this is a risk of **reduced overall surveillance**, particularly of areas in rural and remote Queensland. If a central laboratory is going to be used, there needs to be put in place a cost and time effective means of getting samples to the central laboratory. Veterinarians in rural Queensland have reported to the AVA transport costs ranging from \$159.50 to get samples from Miles to Brisbane (approx.4 hours drive away) to over \$600 from Mt Isa. This cost has to be passed onto the client who is unlikely to want to pay for this unless there are multiple animals affected. The index case of FMD would be easily missed in these scenarios, particularly in pigs which may only present as lameness. Comments from veterinarians in Qld include:

- **From Barcaldine to Coopers Plains, Brisbane:** *To give you an idea of how much more complicated it is to get samples to Coopers Plains, let me outline what that means for me at Barcaldine. Greyhound will **not** guarantee delivery of samples that arrive at around 9:00am that same day to Coopers Plains- great stuff. I suppose there may be third party couriers, but this adds another layer of complexity. To ensure delivery, my only overnight/next day service is Toll Priority, a great service, but it comes at a huge cost. My first consignment to Coopers Plains cost \$190.00, which compares with the same size package to Toowoomba of \$29.00, where the good people in Toowoomba collected the consignments.*
- **From Mt Isa to Coopers Plains:** *The estimate is approx. \$450 (and can be in excess of \$600) from Mt Isa to Coopers Plains. Previously, it cost just \$25 to send samples to Townsville o/n with Greyhound where there was a lab to process the sample.*

- **From Miles to Coopers Plains:** One vet said says that *when the Toowoomba lab was operating, it would cost \$17.60 to send samples overnight from Miles on a Greyhound bus service. Last week I sent the same quantity of samples (enough to fill a small 'six-pack' foam esky) to Coopers Plains overnight from Miles on Toll Logistics and received a bill for \$159.50.*

Reduction of veterinary staff in Biosecurity Qld

The number of government stock inspectors and veterinarians has declined dramatically since 1990 and particularly in the last 10 years. Veterinarian numbers have been especially severely curtailed. In 2012, the state government reduced the overall public service by an average of 20%. For government veterinarians though, in field, laboratory and policy positions, the reduction was 50% and this in just 5 years. The result of this has produced inadequate resources to investigate disease and provide reasonable surveillance to detect disease.

There is also a vulnerability in good policy advice for senior managers who themselves are not veterinarians. There remains a single veterinarian in the Queensland Department of Agriculture senior executive service (the Chief Veterinary Officer) and that person does not sit on the senior management group advising the Director General. Previously there were veterinarians dispersed throughout senior management from Director General down. Only 5 years ago, the Chief Veterinary Officer had 7 veterinarians (including a Director) in expert positions advising on policy and direction in emergency response and key veterinary portfolios. This has been reduced to a handful (approximately 3 veterinary positions).

Veterinarians are the most qualified to provide policy advice on the control of animal disease. They understand the epidemiology of diseases, the animals affected, diagnostic testing and the industry. If the government is going to reduce its expert advice internally there needs to be another avenue to obtain that advice on critical decisions. The Australian Veterinary Association could fill that gap and has done so on various steering committees and liaison groups, but needs a real seat at the decision table if the gap is truly going to be covered.

Specialist training for veterinarians

Knowledge and diagnostic skills in veterinary pathology are essential for Australia to remain at the forefront of diagnosing emerging and exotic diseases. Employment opportunities in veterinary pathology in the private sector has increased in the last few decades but not to an extent where pathology is a viable career option for veterinarians to specialize in. It is vital that governments continue to invest in this specialty. In the 1980's, the Queensland government sent 6 of its pathologists and their families overseas (UK and USA) for several years to gain skills in veterinary pathology. This forward thinking initiative was a significant investment but over the ensuing 2 decades, Qld benefitted from this expert knowledge in a time of new and emerging diseases (Hendra and bat lyssa virus, many new diseases in pigs and poultry). There are but two of these pathologists left and they are nearing retirement. There has been no similar scheme since the 1980's to invest in veterinary pathologists skills.

Recommendations for Queensland

- Increase investment by the Queensland government in animal biosecurity back to sustainable levels and reverse the decline in the numbers of government veterinary officers in particular.
- Increase investment in the development of veterinary pathology skills
- Engage with private veterinary partnerships and the Australian Veterinary Association in decision making, surveillance and disease investigations. Private veterinarians are strategically situated throughout Queensland and can offer an important option for governments to fill the gaps. One avenue to do this would be to better utilize the NSDIP program in Queensland, and AVA could assist the government to liaise with private practitioners to promote this scheme. Another option is to introduce private contracts with veterinarians to do targeted surveillance that they could do concurrently as they visit farms.
- Options need to be looked at to allow better access to laboratory diagnostics, and cheaper options for transporting specimens. Options include:
 - the government arranging for pick-up of samples from their regional centres, or
 - the government offering free transport for diagnostic specimens as is done in NSW, or
 - arranging for testing to be done in existing laboratories in regional Queensland such as Queensland Health laboratories or by partnering with universities or
 - ideally, re-open regional laboratories, especially in the north of the state to cover basic testing and processing of samples