RSPCA AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO THE ADEQUACY OF AUSTRALIA'S BIOSECURITY MEASURES AND RESPONSE PREPAREDNESS, IN PARTICULAR WITH RESPECT TO FOOT-AND-MOUTH DISEASE.

26th August 2022

Adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, in particular with respect to foot-and-mouth disease

(a) the adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, in particular with respect to foot-and-mouth disease and varroa mite;

(b) response to and implementation of previous reports into biosecurity; and

(c) any related matters.

Introduction

The RSPCA thanks the Committee for the opportunity to comment on the inquiry into the adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness. We note the inquiry specifically mentions foot and mouth disease and varroa mite.

The RSPCA is concerned that there could be a significant impact on animal welfare should there be an incursion of foot and mouth disease in Australian farm animals. This could come about due to multiple reasons including poor welfare outcomes for animals killed as part of the disease response, animals at risk due to any nationwide or local area standstill measures preventing movement to processing establishments (in particular in the pig industry where timing of turnoff is crucial for animal welfare) (Laurence, 2002); poor stock handling methods or practices by those responding to disease; long term impacts on farmer mental health (Mort, 2005) that may in turn impact farm animal welfare through poor animal husbandry (FAWC, 2016).

We acknowledge the planning which has led to the development of the Animalplan 2022- 2027 (DAFF, 2022) that covers some aspects of preparedness for emergency animal disease. RSPCA Australia staff were involved in the development of Animalplan and we look forward to seeing more detail in the plan under Objective 5 – improve animal welfare outcomes relevant to emergency scenarios.

Australia's Preparedness

In regard to Australia's preparedness, the RSPCA is concerned that there is a reported shortage of veterinarians in Australia, which is particularly evident in rural regions (AVA, 2022). Veterinary capability and availability are key for early detection of exotic animal diseases. We note that there has historically been a process at the state and territory level to have a veterinary reserve capability, however we understand this has fallen into abeyance over recent years. A refocus on ensuring Australia has adequate veterinarians on the ground to provide day to day support for farmers as well as sufficient additional veterinarians in case of a disease outbreak is crucial. Given the known current shortage of veterinarians it would also be worthwhile to consider recruiting and training veterinary technicians who can be trained in disease response and provide some relief from the need for veterinary skills in some areas of a disease response program. This is to ensure we have the ability to diagnose any exotic animal disease outbreak rapidly and efficiently and that the welfare of the animals is safeguarded in the response.

It is also imperative that those called on to respond to a disease outbreak are adequately trained and deemed competent in all aspects of disease response and that farms have adequate disease

response plans in place. This includes methods for humane killing, vaccination, stock handling procedures, depopulation options and other aspects of working with animals. Given the shortage of veterinarians and the general worker shortage in Australia at present, we believe significant preparation must go into ensuring there are adequate numbers of suitable trained and competent people available in various procedures and for all scales of potential response necessary. Each farm should have a plan in place to deal with the need for depopulation or other means of containing the spread of disease as is appropriate for diseases of concern and AUSVETPLAN. This may include consideration of whether nearby slaughtering establishments can be contracted or utilised to provide services where transport restrictions are implemented.

In the case of a disease incursion, it is imperative that there is adequate traceability of all farm species including sheep and horses to rapidly and accurately identify high risk locations. Whilst horses are not susceptible to foot and mouth disease, there are other exotic animal and zoonotic diseases that pose a threat. Australia needs a consistent way to trace all animals from as early as possible after birth to end of life. Such traceability brings with it biosecurity and animal welfare benefits in the long term.

In the situation where there is a disease outbreak there is a significant and immediate risk to animal welfare. The RSPCA acknowledges that rapidity of response is a crucial part of minimising disease spread. To ensure this does not come at the cost of good animal welfare it is important that there is a mechanism to ensure there are animal welfare officers available to be recruited in any disease response program. This includes the availability of officers on the ground at infected premises and surrounding farms to oversee any on-farm killing that must be undertaken. The availability of animal welfare officers would provide a 'go to' point for any immediate considerations that need to be made and to provide advice, training and oversight of on-farm activities to ensure and report that the welfare provisions in Australia's AUSVETPLAN are met (AHA, 2007).

General Biosecurity Issues

The RSPCA is concerned that Australia has a continued reliance on saleyards to sell farm animals. This environment represents a high risk in terms of biosecurity as such locations can become a major source of spread if disease is not diagnosed or contained early (Fountain, 2018). We note there are also animal welfare implications for moving stock repeatedly and having them exposed to the saleyard environment. A saleyard biosecurity plan must be in place to manage biosecurity risks inherent to the saleyard system where large numbers of animals from varying origins converge, mix and are then transported to their next destination. The biosecurity plan must include reporting procedures in the event of a notifiable endemic or exotic disease as well as procedures for managing the welfare of affected animals. The RSPCA is aware of at least one online selling platform that would avoid these risks and believe there may be biosecurity benefits that should be considered to determine if it is valuable to encourage more online systems to provide more options for producers to avoid this risk.

Further Research Opportunities

The RSPCA also welcomes further research and attention to be given to humane methods of killing animals on farms where appropriate. This is important to help safeguard both animal welfare and the mental health of farmers. The need for rapid depopulation is a particular concern in the pig and

poultry industries where it is most likely needed due to the risks of overstocking in the case of movement restrictions. There needs to be further work done to establish improved humane methods for these species, e.g., the use of low atmospheric pressure stunning (LAPS). It would also assist in responding to the Australian community's growing concern for the treatment of farm animals (Futureye, 2018). There is clear evidence of the impact that farmer mental health can have on their ability to adequately care for their animals. Ensuring there are humane methods available and appropriate support to undertake such methods would reduce the mental health impacts of any disease outbreak and hopefully provide long term better outcomes than otherwise would have existed.

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