



hoping for the
best...

preparing
for the
worst

Millions of dollars and megawatts of brainpower continue to be applied toward protecting agriculture from bioterrorism, a process that by nature will always be a work in progress. The most effective protection for your feedlot, however, may be the ability to never let your guard down.

BY SHARLA ISHMAEL

WHAT IF? That's a question everyone in Cattle Feeding Country has asked themselves and each other the past several years. It first entered the vernacular in February of 2001 when foot-and-mouth disease rocked England. What if the disease should accidentally come to the U.S. by a traveler? What if animal rights activists sabotaged the U.S. beef industry by intentionally introducing the virus?

Then came the terrorist attack on Sept. 11, 2001. And more questions.

The U.S. animal health infrastructure mobilized quickly in 2001 as questions were asked and played out in simulated exercises. Since 9/11, the planning and preparation has taken on a new sense of urgency, invigorated by a lot of new money from the federal government and an increased interest in

partnerships between public and private groups to define the risks and determine the protections from a terrorist attack on agriculture using either biological agents or traditional terrorist tactics.

So is agriculture any safer from bioterrorist or agroterrorist attack?

While a tremendous amount of manpower, cooperation and expertise has gone into developing prevention plans and emergency response, it's hard to come up with an accurate answer because, for one, there is no consensus about the likelihood of an agroterror attack. The threat is real; the risk is unknown.

"Are there threats against the United States in general? Yes. Are there threats against U.S. industry as a part of our infrastructure? Yes. Therefore, the threat is real," explains Dr. Dee Ellis, Texas Animal Health Commission administrative veterinarian and Area 7 director.

"The question is what mechanism would a terrorist or a person wishing to disrupt our daily lives choose to take?"

"Obviously, the animal slant could be of great economic consequence if they introduced certain disease agents," Ellis says. "It would not necessarily be easy to utilize agroterror to wreak havoc on the human health population. So for that reason, it's hard to say what the real threat is."

In other words, if you're dealing with a foreign terrorist whose presumed primary goal is to kill as many Americans as possible, perhaps the risk to agriculture is not as high.

But if you're talking about domestic terrorists—such as animal rights or environmental extremists—the risks could be higher.

Other experts take a different view. "It's my understanding that in the caves

in Afghanistan they actually found documents, especially (about) foot-and-mouth disease, but several diseases that are a potential threat to the cattle industry in the United States," says Dr. John Romero, assistant state veterinarian in New Mexico. "I think that the potential is significant."

So, facing a shadowy enemy with unknown goals, state and national animal health agencies have poured their resources into emergency response programs while using federal funding to enhance surveillance and diagnostic abilities to keep foreign and emerging diseases out of the United States.

TEXAS' PLANS

"Our concern, primarily, is that we have to be prepared from a veterinary health perspective, to defend our animal industries against all disease incursions whether they're intentional or accidental," explains Ellis. "Our response would be the same regardless of the source and the intent. That's where this gets tricky."

"If it's intentional, of course, then you get into the crisis management side of things with the police and FBI," he says. "We are more concerned with the consequence management, which is response and recovery to the disease incident."

Ellis says animal health experts are working with industry groups — individually as partners and as stakeholders — to help develop plans that can not only prevent the incursion of a disease agent, whether it's accidental or intentional, but also quickly respond and recover from it.

"It's a multi-faceted approach and there's really no way to judge what the risk is or what is the preferred method that they would use," Ellis adds. "We have to be prepared for all scenarios."

One of the things the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC) has done is to work with other members of the state Emer-

gency Management Council, industry groups, neighboring state agencies and Canada and Mexico to run simulation exercises, including a cattle feeding-focused exercise in Amarillo, which TCFA helped to sponsor.

RESPONSE PLAN

Texas, like Oklahoma and New Mexico, has a statewide plan to address a foreign animal disease outbreak, whether intentional or not. Dave Tomkins, TAHC emergency management coordinator, explains how the State of Texas Foreign Animal Diseases plan would work:

"Basically, we look to the local animal or property owner to initially see something is wrong with his or her animals," Tomkins says. "From that point, they should call in their own private veterinarian to look at the animals to see what the problem might be. There are certain things that we look for, like the neurological signs in animals, or wholesale death in a lot of animals or a lot of animals becoming sick all at once."

Based on these signs, if the private veterinarian determines that there is something there that could be one of the diseases of concern, they would notify the Texas Animal Health Commission or the USDA counterparts with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, he says. "Between the veterinarians assigned either to our agency or to the federal agency here in Texas, we would send out what we call a FADD—Foreign Animal Disease Diagnostician."

That individual would immediately go to the premises and look at the disease, Tomkins adds.

"He might immediately ask for help from what we call FAST—First Assessment and Sampling Team."

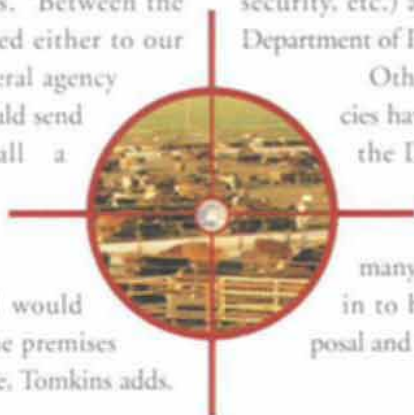
The two teams of experts would immediately start taking tissue and blood samples and send them to an appropriate lab. "Most suspected foreign animal disease specimens must go to a specific lab such as the Foreign Animal Disease Diagnostic Lab at Plum Island, New York, or the National Veterinary Service Lab in Ames, Iowa," Ellis says.

At that point, with a "presumptive positive," the Texas Emergency Response Team (TERT) is engaged to determine whether and where an incident command post should be set up while awaiting final testing results. The state coordinator of emergency management is contacted and personnel are chosen to lead the response team from both a veterinary standpoint as well as a designee from the Department of Public Safety.

"The veterinarian runs the operations and makes the policy decisions on what to do with the disease, also working with Austin to make policy decisions and the federal government on how wide you might draw your circle out to decide what animals have to be destroyed to stop the disease," Tomkins explains. "The support issues (traffic control, security, etc.) are done by the Texas Department of Public Safety."

Other relevant state agencies have roles to play such as the Department of Transportation, as just one example of many, which could be called in to help with carcass disposal and other issues.

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PROTECTING YOUR FEEDYARD

You and your employees are the first line of defense to protect your feedyard against bioterrorism/agroterrorism. Everyone involved with the operation should be aware of potential signs that something is suspicious and know where and how to report any unusual incidents.

"You have to practice what you preach," says Dr. Dee Ellis of the Texas Animal Health Commission. "You can implement procedures that could be as simple as being aware of visitors and keeping a log of them, locking gates, making sure feed sources are safe and talking to workers about what other animal operations they're around or other activities that could bring disease into your business. Those are very simple things that the industry and producer groups can do."

Other preventative tips from USDA include:

- ✓ **Be Aware.** Know who your local law enforcement officials are and how to contact them. Continually check animals and crops for unusual health changes.
- ✓ **Be Bold.** Know all your employees, monitor visitors, ask strangers for photo ID. Establish systems to promote ongoing security consciousness.
- ✓ **Be Careful.** Have adequate outside lights and/or backup energy sources. Consider adding alarms, cameras, motion detection lights and other appropriate security enhancements.
- ✓ **Be Diligent.** Lock doors, windows, equipment and feed storage areas. Schedule and monitor all deliveries and maintenance.
- ✓ **Be Enterprising.** Inspect all feed, equipment and other inputs for signs of tampering. Develop alternative water and feed sources as backups.
- ✓ **Be Focused.** Limit access to storage areas. Practice operation shut-down, reporting, quarantine and evacuation procedures.

The Animal Agricultural Alliance (www.animalagalliance.org) has detailed recommendations for agroterrorism precautions, including:

- ✓ Know how many local law enforcement officers are on duty during early morning hours – prime time for "hits" on rural facilities – and whom to call for all situations and their response times.
- ✓ Make sure they have copies of maps of your facilities which indicate service shut-off locations, security areas and any area of sensitivity or vulnerability.

At the federal level, the Department of Homeland Security is the ultimate authority, with the FBI, USDA, Department of Health and Human Services and many more agencies playing appropriate roles.

"We've got some funding," Ellis says. "The challenge is that we need to strengthen our partnerships and make sure we properly utilize the funding and grant money that's out there. That can only be

done by a process that includes stakeholders and industry working side by side with federal and state officials to develop better plans, better response mechanisms and better prevention. It's not just a matter of insufficient resources; the challenge for us is also one of coordination."

OKLAHOMA'S PLANS

"The way our structure is in Oklahoma, we have a few field people sta-

- ✓ Evaluate every request for information about your operation. Ask for references – especially from those claiming to be reporters.
- ✓ Escort visitors at all times.
- ✓ Maintain basic security by locking office doors and file cabinets. Have firewalls installed on your computer systems. Keep animal health products under lock and key.
- ✓ Thoroughly screen all job applicants and take time to check all references. Double-check anyone who shows a university or college identification.
- ✓ Watch for unusual behavior by new employees. Note the absence of leather or other animal products.
- ✓ Watch for warning signs that your operation might be a target: harassing calls or letters, unusual interest in gaining employment, special interest groups campaigning locally, etc.
- ✓ In all cases, designate a single company spokesperson to handle all calls about animal care, animal rights or any company policy relative to animals.
- ✓ Develop a crisis communication and action plan.

Current policy calls for depopulation in event of a disease outbreak such as foot-and-mouth disease. Some in the industry argue that vaccination is a more viable alternative. Regardless of the outcome of that debate, one of the biggest things a cattle feeder can do to prepare for a foreign animal disease outbreak, whether intentional or accidental, is to start thinking about a disposal plan, says Dr. Burke Healey, Oklahoma state veterinarian.

"If we got a foreign animal disease and we had to depopulate them, something like foot-and-mouth disease where you can't transport them, the feedlots need to be looking at can they – and how would they – dispose of the animals in their feedlot," Healey explains.

"We need our industry people to determine how they would dispose of their own animals if they were required to, without relying on the government to do it, without relying on packers," Healey says. "If the answer is 'I don't know' or 'I can't,' then that's okay, too. But we need to know that." ■

tioned with home offices around, but we don't have field offices like Amarillo or the area offices that you have in Texas," explains Dr. Burke Healey, state veterinarian with the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry.

On a statewide level, Healey says Oklahoma has a set of guidelines through its Emergency State Function that details important information.

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This information details who plays what role in animal emergencies of any kind, from blizzards to an act of terrorism. He says they are constantly re-evaluating the state's emergency management plan based on new threats, government mandates, availability of vaccines, etc.

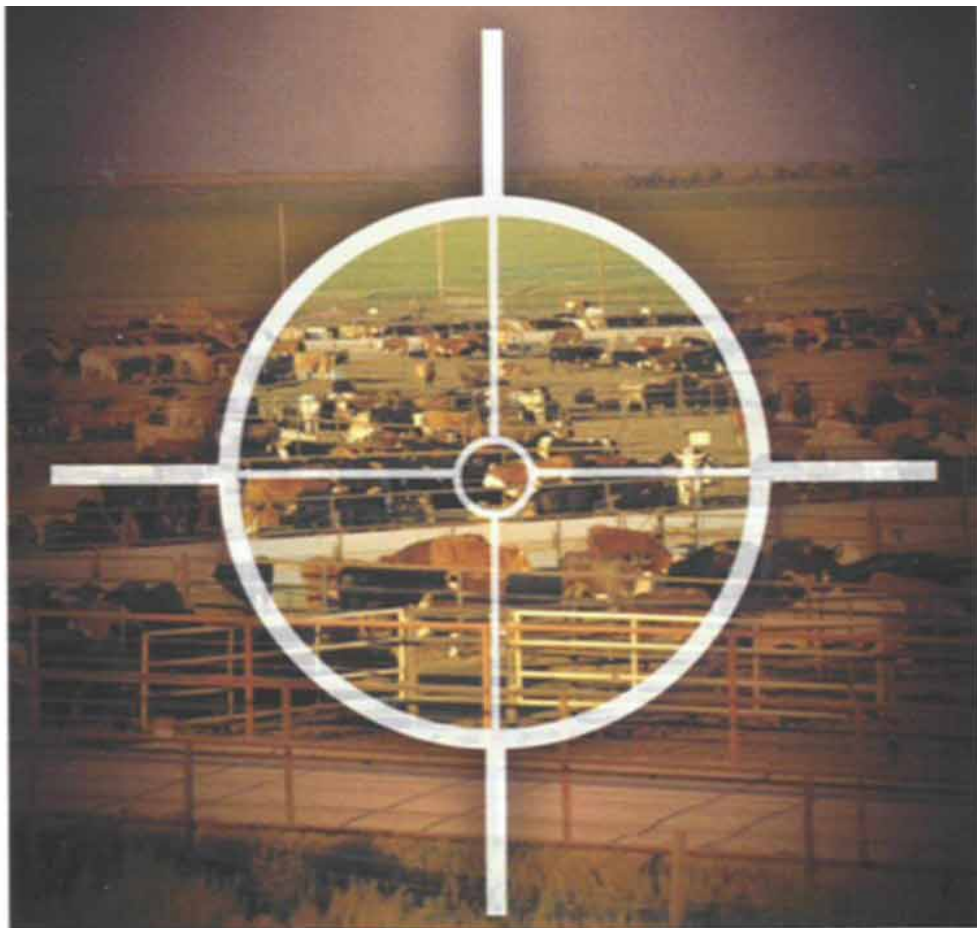
It works much like the Texas plan, in that the producer is the first line of defense, calling in their veterinarian who then, if warranted, calls the animal health officials in the agriculture department, which sends out a FADD to determine whether or not it's a priority disease situation.

"And when the first call comes, in today's climate, we're going to notify law enforcement locally and at state levels that we've potentially got this thing working out there just so they could be on alert," explains Healey. "If the FADD calls back and says it looks like a disease, we'll also gather more information that we can relay back to law enforcement. Such as, this person just came back from South America...."

"Or on the other hand, they had some suspicious characters in the neighborhood and they had reason to believe this may be sabotage," he adds. "We can take that kind of information, share it with law enforcement and help each other make decisions as to how we should respond at that level."

NEW MEXICO'S PLANS

The state of New Mexico is also in the process of revising its emergency response plans. And they've been training with the Southwest Coordination



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Center of the Forest Service, which has a long history of managing large-scale, multi-agency events, says Dr. John Romero, assistant state veterinarian.

"The state is working on the problem on multiple fronts," Romero explains. "We've done lots of planning. We're working closely with the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and the Department of Agriculture, both at the USDA level and the New Mexico Department of Agriculture. We are working internationally as well. The New Mexico Office of Homeland Security is arranging a joint exercise with Mexico."

The New Mexico Livestock Board has the primary role for rapid response to an emergency situation before federal help arrives. Romero says they would try

to contain the disease outbreak by quarantine and movement control as well as depopulation, depending on the disease encountered. To do this, the Livestock Board can enlist the governor's help to leverage whatever resources are needed, from law enforcement to local fire departments.

"The state is actually revising its entire All Hazards Plan," says Romero. "What we're doing is taking our separate plans and trying to meld them into a better product and something that's a little more updated. We learned a lot from 9/11 and there are federal mandates now that weren't in place before, like this National Interagency Incident Command System."

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AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL

The same sort of planning and coordination has been going on in Washington, D.C. In early February 2004, President Bush issued a directive that establishes national policy to defend agriculture and the food system against terrorist attacks, major disasters and other emergencies.

Ed Loyd, USDA deputy press secretary, explains: "Since 9/11, the food and agriculture industry was identified as one of the critical infrastructures that needed to be protected. The president's directive establishes the integrative framework for how all of the different federal agencies work together to accomplish that."

Some highlights from Bush's directive include instructions for relevant agencies to enhance intelligence operations focusing on agriculture, food and water; creating a new biological threat awareness capacity to detect such attacks; and to expand vulnerability assessments of the agriculture and food sectors.

Also, it directs the Secretary of Agriculture to study and make recommendations for the use of new and existing financial risk management tools "encouraging self-protection for agriculture and food enterprises vulnerable to losses due to terrorism." It also supports the development of interdisciplinary degree programs to prepare food defense professionals.

Loyd says USDA has requested \$381 million in its 2004-2005 budget for a Food and Agriculture Defense Initiative. A major portion of that funding is to go toward completing the National Centers for Animal Health at Ames, Iowa.

This initiative would also allocate funds for increasing monitoring and surveillance of animal and plant diseases and pests, research on emerging animal diseases, increasing the availability of vaccines and establishing a system to track select disease agents of plants, says Loyd.

"Our objective is to be able to have the ability to appropriately respond within 24 hours of some sort of outbreak," he explains.

SAFETY STARTS AT HOME

At the end of the day, however, it's important to remember that all of the government's vast resources and plans to help you – begin with you (See the sidebar Protecting Your Feedyard).

"The biggest problem that I see, whether it's bioterrorism or accidental introduction of foreign animal disease, is we gear up but we can't stay on a high level of preparedness at all times," says Healey.

"We need to set up protocols that we can manage on a daily basis that aren't overly burdensome but are manageable and still maintain some sense of security." 