



Australian Government

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Case Study – Exercise Eleusis: Simulating management of a zoonotic disease outbreak

A national simulation called Exercise Eleusis '05 was held in Australia on 29 November - 1 December 2005.

The Exercise simulated an outbreak of avian influenza (AI) and evaluated the industry and government's national capability to manage a zoonotic emergency animal disease (EAD) outbreak.

The objectives of the Exercise were to test: the effective integration of national emergency zoonosis arrangements between industry, agricultural agencies and health agencies at state and territory, and Australian Government levels; and public communication disease control policies and strategies.

About 1000 people participated throughout Australia, including industry, government agriculture and health agencies, emergency management staff, food safety agencies and others.

Australia's experience with the exercise is summarised here under the headings of "What worked well" and "What needed improvement".

What worked well

- Precursor activities included briefings for all jurisdictions and the poultry industries, workshops that focussed on agriculture and health integration in zoonotic EAD outbreaks, public communications, activation of the rapid response team (RRT), national resource management and activation of national agriculture committee meetings. This approach was highly beneficial in exposing potential problems and developing integrated responses before the exercise.
- In designing the exercise, it was recognised that the topic of AI would be highly complex. Its success was due to the use of a multi-disciplinary planning team capable of covering all aspects (veterinary, industry, health and social) of a potential response.
- When compared to Exercise Minotaur, Exercise Eleusis evidenced more willingness by agricultural agencies and associated stakeholders to act and communicate nationally. As the exercise progressed, increasing consultation and integration was noted between affected parties at all levels, especially between health and agriculture. Relationships formed in precursor activities were strengthened and the cooperation and enthusiasm of the overwhelming majority of participants enhanced the conduct of the exercise.
- Exercise Minotaur, subsequent EAD incidents and exercises have resulted in enhanced information sharing across jurisdictions. Dissemination of information was

facilitated by cross representation of health and agriculture on national committees and the use of teleconferences in general.

- Exercise Eleusis affirmed the value of AUSVETPLAN in responding to EADs. It further highlighted the necessity, for an immediate response, of having strategies and plans in place prior to an outbreak.

What needed improvement

- A key learning for future exercises is the need to adequately resource the development process and, in particular, the planning team to allow them to focus fully on the exercise.
- Jurisdictional (health, animal, community) responses should work in a complementary manner to support the national objective. The agricultural sector (incorporating industry) and the health sector have well-developed emergency arrangements that have been tested in a number of real events. Each state and territory government also has whole of government, all-hazards emergency management arrangements. The challenge posed by a zoonotic EAD outbreak is to make sure these pre-existing arrangements allow effective information sharing, joint decision making and cohesive action. This would require stronger linkages between agriculture and health agencies throughout Australia. Optimal integration was possible when agriculture and health agencies were co-located during the exercise. For this reason, co-location of these personnel in a zoonotic disease incident should be seriously considered.
- The Exercise may not have adequately tested the skills base required to ensure sufficient personnel are available to meet the challenges of a major EAD outbreak. This was because the short timeframe of the exercise did not establish whether there is sufficient trained staff to sustain a response for the prolonged period possibly required by an outbreak.
- Through the Exercise, a requirement was identified for a clear national policy and process for assessing and communicating the risk to human health of zoonotic EADs. Similarly, the Exercise identified the need for unambiguous specifications for the personal protection required by workers at risk of exposure. Inconsistencies between agriculture and health policies and between jurisdictions on OHS and prophylaxis measures served to create uncertainty during the Exercise. It was identified that health and agriculture need to collaborate on a review of national health and agricultural guidelines on OHS, including personal protective measures and antiviral prophylaxis to ensure they are consistent and able to be implemented.
- Local government activities were outside the scope of Exercise Eleusis, however, they form a vital part of a nationally integrated response and therefore need to be included in EAD arrangements.
- Since Exercise Minotaur there has been a greater acceptance of the national coordination and support role provided by the National Coordination Centre (NCC), but this and other potential roles have not been properly documented in existing national plans and agreements. This was evidenced in the Exercise where both Consultative Committee on EADs (CCEAD) and the National Management Group (NMG) attempted to analyse and align agricultural response strategies. This could have been undertaken by NCC with only substantive issues being provided to

CCEAD and NMG, as NCC's role in supporting NMG and CCEAD includes analysis and coordination of policy and scientific issues. Given the time pressures and the importance of the personnel involved, all national committees should focus on major issues and decisions rather than fundamental analysis.

- During the Exercise, the considerable resource challenge of public communication was recognised. From its experience in EAD responses, the poultry industry believes media interest would have been more intense than that simulated during the exercise and that communications resources activated for the exercise would have been insufficient to meet those demands. Although over 200 personnel have been trained in crisis communications there is currently no protocol for their activation and deployment during exercises. It was recommended that a formal procedural mechanism be established to mobilise the communications staff who have been nationally trained and accredited to assist in an EAD response. Their activation would require formal agreement of the heads of the affected Australian Government, state and territory agencies.
- Industry experienced difficulty in fully and effectively contributing to decision processes during the Exercise. This was, in part, due to a lack of available, experienced industry personnel as identified above. Greater influence should have led to more beneficial industry outcomes, such as a better balance between disease control and industry continuity. It is imperative that industry representatives are released from other commitments so they can be fully engaged for the duration of an EAD response. There should be sufficient trained industry liaison officers (LOs) to permit placement in all emergency operations centres. In addition, industry LOs at all levels should be networked nationally to exchange information and, in working closely with national industry bodies, provide common industry positions.
- While information systems for agriculture have substantially improved, the Exercise showed that a broader range of information requirements must be met to encompass all sectors involved in a national EAD response. The exercise identified the need for development of a real-time, single national information recording, sharing and access system to ensure all parties, including industry, operate on current information. The system must be capable of immediate activation and include formal inter- and intra-agency and jurisdictional communication networks.
- Public communication material moved readily between government agencies due to successful National Communication Network (NCN) and National Emergency Media Response Network arrangements. However, the flow of information to some other stakeholders, particularly industry, was not as efficient because these stakeholders are not directly connected to the NCN. It is essential to formally include industry in development of an agreed communication strategy and key messages for presentation to CCEAD and NMG.
- The exercise highlighted that some aspects of existing national plans and policies were out of date or required amendment to ensure inter-agency consistency and applicability to a real situation. The Exercise also pinpointed the need to continually update disease response strategies given the rapidly changing scientific understanding of zoonotic diseases such as AI.