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Sustaining a biosecurity response: What makes an effective and contemporary biosecurity 'combat' agency? Summary report by the Biosecurity Council of Western Australia

Biosecurity Council of Western Australia

SUMMARY REPORT

Sustaining a biosecurity response: What makes an effective and contemporary biosecurity 'combat' agency?

June 2019

The Biosecurity Council are grateful to the industry and government stakeholders that participated in the consultation process, and for the work undertaken by Dr Ron Glanville.

Executive summary

The overall purpose of this work was to provide advice and guidance to the Minister for Agriculture and Food and Director General of the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD) on how the combined skills and resources of DPIRD can better sustain a high-level biosecurity response whilst retaining the integrity of its other functions.

To develop this advice, two key activities were undertaken:

1. Information gathering and review (via literature review and key informant interviews) to identify the essential characteristics of a biosecurity combat agency; the skillsets required to respond to high-level biosecurity incidents; and ways biosecurity combat agencies minimise the impact of high-level incident response on other business areas within the agency; and
2. Stakeholder consultation on what they view as the key features of an effective, contemporary biosecurity combat agency.

Australia has a somewhat complex system to manage biosecurity emergency responses, guided by a number of national cost-sharing agreements and technical plans. Within this system, the States are responsible for implementing responses within their jurisdictions.

Similar trends regarding preparedness for biosecurity emergencies are evident to varying degrees in each jurisdiction. Notably, funding and resources appear to follow a cyclical pattern, with periods of tight resources followed by corrective action when the associated risks are realised. Nevertheless, there are common factors/strategies that help agencies to sustain a biosecurity response. These, along with other features of an effective biosecurity combat agencies identified through this research, form the basis of

a framework to assist DPIRD sustain a high-level biosecurity response whilst retaining the integrity of its other functions (Box 1).

The number and range of biosecurity incidents is likely to remain high, or even rise in the future. It is critical that DPIRD is able to respond in an effective and efficient manner. The formation of DPIRD and the subsequent structural changes provides an opportunity for DPIRD to restructure itself as a contemporary biosecurity 'combat' agency. The report makes seven strategic recommendations that, when implemented, will enable DPIRD to better sustain a high-level biosecurity response.

Recommendations:

1. **DPIRD develops a strategy that clarifies the expectations for biosecurity response in DPIRD.**

   Such a strategy should be developed at the Senior Executive level to provide authority and underpin an organisational culture change where all staff recognise that biosecurity is core business of the entire agency. Alongside this, a business continuity plan should be developed that identifies the normal services that must be maintained during a large-scale response.

2. **Implement a multi-layered approach to stakeholder engagement as part of DPIRD's preparedness planning.**

   There is a clear need to identify those that have a stake in biosecurity response, as well as those that can support DPIRD to undertake responses. Relationships with these stakeholders must be built/maintained using an effective, multi-layered approach that fosters partnerships.

3. **Formalise cost-sharing arrangements with stakeholders.**

   Discussions should be held with stakeholders to define criteria, circumstances and arrangements for cost-sharing State-based responses.

4. **Establish a State Government biosecurity contingency fund.**

   High-level discussions should be held with Treasury officials to better define the criteria, circumstances and arrangements for funding the State component of a response (whether wholly or partially State-funded), including recognition of the longer-term nature of biosecurity responses.

5. **Develop and maintain resources, including external resources, to ensure DPIRD is operationally ready for pest/disease incursions.**

   A clear 'concept of operations' should be developed and actions taken to ensure operational readiness, including the development of operational plans for exemplar species.

6. **Develop and implement an active intelligence gathering and analysis network.**

   Establishing an intelligence gathering network will provide critical support during a biosecurity response, as well as ongoing surveillance for early detection during ‘peace time’.

7. **Provide staff with opportunities and incentives for innovation, research and development.**

   Opportunities for research and innovation are a key factor supporting the retention of technical and science staff. Innovation is critical for developing improved diagnostic, eradication, surveillance and epidemiological methods/analyses.

Box 1. Framework for sustaining a high-level biosecurity response (see also section 4).

Organisational 'response' culture: A positive organisational 'response' culture is fundamental to effective biosecurity response. Such a culture will facilitate staff commitment to biosecurity responses, including data collection and sharing.

A clear and supportive authorising environment: A clear and supportive authorising environment provides clarity on the priority of responses, ensures that resources are made available from across the agency and encourages staff involvement.

Clear State funding arrangements: These arrangements can create certainty and encourage the most efficient and/or effective responses.

Concept of operations: A clear concept of operations for biosecurity response enables the seamless initiation and implementation of an effective response.

Preparedness planning: Jurisdictions tend to rely heavily on national plans, policies and guidelines for their preparedness planning. The aspiration is for the national policies to be contextualised for Western Australia.

Intelligence: Effective intelligence gathering is critical in a complex emergency. Lower-level pest and disease emergencies can turn into crises if inadequate intelligence and analysis leads to unexpected outcomes.

Human resource availability: It is unrealistic to expect any biosecurity agency to have enough skilled, internal staff to manage a very large biosecurity response. A resourcing strategy that includes formal, scalable and flexible arrangements to access the required human resources is essential.

Operational readiness of human resources: To mount an effective response to any biosecurity incident, access to sufficient numbers of trained personnel is essential.

Industry engagement and partnerships: Industry representatives provide liaison between industry and government; provide specialist advice and knowledge; represent their industry/ community as part of the decision-making and planning processes; and play a key communication role.

Information systems: Information systems are required that support the technical aspects of a response as well as corporate processes such as finance and human resource management.

Diagnostics and innovation: Access to diagnostic systems for the full range of invasive species is necessary, as is ongoing innovation to develop improved diagnostic, eradication, surveillance and epidemiological methods/analyses.

Communications: Effective internal communication, as well as providing information to, and consultation with, affected industries and communities, is vital during biosecurity responses.

Recovery: Response systems should facilitate the recovery of affected stakeholders from the pest/disease outbreak and the response itself.

Business continuity: The normal services that must be maintained during a large-scale response and the level of resources required to maintain those services needs to be documented.