

EXERCISE ELEUSIS – AVIAN INFLUENZA SIMULATION

Communication from Australia

The following communication, received on 18 January 2006, is being circulated at the request of the delegation of Australia.

1. Australia has an internationally acknowledged capability to deal with emergency animal disease incidents and has successfully done so in the past. At the same time, Australia continually works to improve the systems in place to deal with potential disease outbreaks. One of the mechanisms it uses is disease simulations, such as "Exercise Minotaur", a foot and mouth disease simulation conducted in 2002.

I. EXERCISE ELEUSIS

2. From 29 November to 1 December 2005, Australia conducted Exercise Eleusis '05, a response to a simulated outbreak of avian influenza. Avian influenza was chosen as the basis of the simulation given the spread of the H5N1 strain throughout Asia and that such an Exercise would test the ability of the country to respond to a significant outbreak of a zoonotic (animal to human) disease in three Australian States. In this instance, the Exercise did not involve physical field operations.

3. The objective of the Exercise was to test the integration and functional capacity of national arrangements including those that have a human health aspect. Further, the interaction between health and agriculture during this exercise was closely monitored.

4. Development of Exercise Eleusis '05 was led by the Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry and the Department of Health and Ageing. It involved participants from a wide range of Government and industry organisations. Leadership of the simulated response came from the agriculture and health agencies in the Australian Government and their counterparts in the Australian states and territories. A broad range of other government agencies in both the Australian Government and the states and territories also participated in the exercise including the Australian Government Departments of Prime Minister & Cabinet, Foreign Affairs and Trade, Treasury and Industry and Resources and Finance. The egg and chicken industries also strongly contributed to the simulation. It is estimated that over 1000 people participated (directly and indirectly) nationally in the Exercise and its lead up activities.

5. The role of participants was primarily decision making and undertaking actions to support the decision making. The following was specifically tested during the exercise:

- Nation-wide response arrangements;

- Human disease diagnostic and management capability;
- Administrative arrangements;
- Logistical arrangements;
- Communication requirements;
- Disease control policies and strategies;
- Joint human health and agriculture response arrangements; and
- Interstate trade issues.

6. A number of international observers were present during the Exercise, including from the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) along with international human health officials.

II. OUTCOMES OF "EXERCISE ELEUSIS '05"

7. Exercise Eleusis '05 proved to be a highly successful test of Australia's ability to respond to a simulated multi-focal outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza. It demonstrated that Australia's response arrangements for significant animal health incidents, including zoonotic outbreaks, are robust. It was a highly valuable training event that confirmed the value of improvements implemented since "Exercise Minotaur" in 2002.

8. High level national committees are in the process of formally considering the outcomes of the Exercise. Pending finalisation of their reports, the following is provided as an interim summary of the key outcomes.

9. Linkages between agriculture and health agencies throughout the country worked well during the Exercise. This was underwritten by the exchange of liaison officers at response centres, exchange of situation reports and reciprocal participation in national management committees. However, this now needs to be more fully considered and formalised at the jurisdictional and national levels.

10. A clear national policy and process is required for assessing the risk to human health of zoonotic disease outbreaks and making rapid decisions on the level of personal protection required by workers at risk of exposure. This includes personal protective equipment and, where appropriate, additional medical measures such as antiviral prophylaxis for avian influenza or antibiotics for anthrax. This rationale must be communicated to all parties (the public, response personnel, poultry producers/workers, service providers, medical practitioners, etc). Public acceptance and understanding of such policies will be greatly strengthened if jurisdictions align their policies and practices nationally to undertake specific communication of them.

11. Public communications associated with a zoonotic disease outbreak would be a considerable challenge requiring significant resources. The national networks and associated public communications systems already established for both agriculture and health agencies worked well but would need to be substantially scaled up in terms of resources to handle the media and public interest that would be generated.

12. The sheer quantity of information generated in such a response demands the use of highly effective information technology based systems. An action from Exercise Minotaur was the acquisition of such a system and it is planned that this technology will be trialled in late 2006.

13. Maintaining the currency of disease response strategies in light of advances in scientific understanding of zoonotic diseases, such as avian influenza, requires a continuing investment by all jurisdictions in adequate numbers in skilled planning and response personnel. This investment needs to occur in both the agriculture and health sectors.

14. Co-ordinated action is the key to a successful response when a disease outbreak effects have a national impact. National committees must clearly articulate a national objective and ensure that jurisdictional responses work in a complimentary manner to attain national objectives.

15. In developing "Exercise Eleusis '05", it was recognised that the topic of avian influenza would be highly complex, requiring a multi-faceted planning process. The success of the exercise was due to the use of a multi-disciplinary planning team capable of developing an exercise covering all aspects (veterinary, industry, health, economic and social) of a potential response. This Exercise allowed a scenario that was recognised by participants as valid in all respects. Use of lead-in events to review particular aspects of a complex problem was highly beneficial. A key learning for future exercises is the need to adequately resource the exercise planning process and, in particular, the planning team to allow them to focus on the development of the exercise.

16. The Exercise evidenced the benefit of early action against the source of potential avian influenza outbreaks. In terms of national interest, this means focusing efforts on disease prevention in our region and strengthening preventative strategies (surveillance and quarantine border activities) on shore.

17. Australia will make available copies of the formal report on "Exercise Eleusis '05" to Members, and will post the report on the DAFF website (www.daff.gov.au) later in 2006. Australia believes that there is an opportunity for increased international sharing of lessons learned from simulations such as "Exercise Eleusis '05" and notes that several countries have also held, or plan to hold, significant avian influenza simulations. International organisations such OIE, FAO and the World Health Organisation are well positioned to assist with this task.
