



Victorian
Farmers
Federation

SUBMISSION

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs &
Transport References Committee

**Inquiry into the adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures
and response preparedness, in particular with respect to foot-
and-mouth disease**

September 2022

The Victorian Farmers Federation

Victoria's agricultural production accounts for close to \$14 billion of Victoria's economy and 27 per cent of Australia's exports per annum. Victoria's farmers produce high quality food and fibre, produced to high standards of safety, with little taxpayer support, and to some of the strictest environmental and highest animal welfare controls in the world.

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) represents the Victorian farming community which endeavours to ensure a profitable, sustainable and socially responsible agriculture sector connecting with consumers.

We have a proud history representing Victoria's farm businesses since 1979 – primarily family farms that produce the eggs, grain, fruit and vegetables, meat, and milk that help to feed Victoria's six million people, and the bigger global community, every day.

The VFF consists of commodity groups: dairy, grains, horticulture, chicken meat, eggs, pigs and livestock – and expert committees representing; water, planning, environment and climate change, farming systems, farm business, transport and infrastructure and workforce and social infrastructure.

Our vision is for a secure farming future – for Victoria and for generations to come. In our mission we are the voice of Victorian agriculture: we protect and progress farmers' interests.

Introduction

The Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's biosecurity response and preparedness measures.

Ongoing threats to biosecurity across domestic and international borders have revealed the vulnerable position of Australian agriculture in the biosecurity landscape. This highlights the need for a cohesive, strong, and measured response to managing and mitigating threats to biosecurity as they arise.

As Australia's largest agricultural producer, valued at \$17.8 billion (gross value agricultural production), Victoria's agricultural production and supply chains are essential to the domestic and export economy, representing 27% of Australian food and fibre export value. This system of production efficiency and consequent prosperity is reliant on stringent biosecurity protocols which protect Victorian agriculture from endemic, established and exotic pests, weeds and diseases.

Given the integral role of agriculture to the Victorian and national economy, it is vital that agriculture is appropriately represented across all elements of the Inquiry, to ensure that sustainable and strong resourcing and safeguards to biosecurity are upheld.

A strengthened and well-resourced national biosecurity system ensures that Victoria's agricultural industry can continue to operate import and export markets efficiently, while being safeguarded from imminent threats to biosecurity.

This submission aims to explain the implications of Australia's biosecurity preparedness on Victorian agriculture, the wider farming community and recommend improvements to the Senate to best represent the primary industries.

Discussion

In line with the National Farmers Federation's (NFF) submission to the Inquiry, the VFF believes that greater regional engagement with neighbouring countries in the Asia-Pacific can better safeguard Australian agriculture from offshore threats to biosecurity.

Victorian agriculture is dependent on the export market, with food and fibre exported to countries including China, the United States, Japan, New Zealand and Indonesia in 2020-2021.

Between 2020-2021, Victoria's total food and fibre exports were valued at \$14 billion, and comprised:

- \$3.3 billion for meat
- \$2.5 billion in grains
- 73% of Australia's dairy exports

With each respective industry leading in their Australian export market.

Emergency Animal Diseases are increasingly prevalent in a modernised, and globalised trade landscape, where agricultural goods are frequently moved across domestic and international borders. In line with the principles of the NFF's policy statement on biosecurity¹, the VFF reiterates the endorsement of the successful management of exotic, established and endemic invasive species to prevent biosecurity incursions which may jeopardise Victoria's export status.

The VFF believes that wider consultation with stakeholders and participation of farmers as key stakeholders across the biosecurity continuum is key to ensuring that preparedness initiatives at the Commonwealth level sufficiently address logistics issues at the farmgate. As outlined in the National Biosecurity Strategy, shared responsibility continues to be a pivotal focus.

Australia maintains a 'clean and green' image which provides us a competitive advantage on in global markets. In today's market, social licence and consumer faith in agricultural products are paramount to securing continued market access. The VFF welcomes the Australian Government's commitment in March 2022 of \$100 million per annum to support Australia's biosecurity system and insists that this be maintained and simultaneously include the \$170 million pledged over the forward estimates.

In Victoria, recent memory of emergency animal diseases has dictated the continued need for vigilance with an increased biosecurity risk profile. The following case studies highlight the impact

¹ National Farmers Federation Biosecurity policy statement: https://nff.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/FINAL-NFF-biosecurity-policy-statement_May-2020.pdf

of emergency animal diseases on Victorian agriculture, and the need for ongoing, sustainable resourcing mechanisms from the Australian government across the biosecurity landscape.

Case study: Avian influenza (AI)

Between July to August 2020, Victoria experienced the largest outbreak of avian influenza on record in Australia. AI is a highly pathogenic, notifiable disease typically spread by wild birds to domestic poultry.

Key facts:

- 6 properties impacted across 3 regions.
- Housing orders – the first in Australia were imposed in the Golden Plains Shire to reduce interaction of domestic poultry with wild birds.
- Approximately 460,000 birds culled.

International recognition of freedom from disease was declared on 26 February 2021.

Although avian influenza was a product of exposure to wild birds, arthropod vectors such as mosquitoes, biting flies and ticks introduce complexity into the biosecurity landscape. The intersect of arthropod vectors and wildlife presents a further challenge to intensive animal systems where insect access to animal facilities is largely unavoidable.

Case study: Japanese encephalitis virus (JEV)

JEV is an exotic, zoonotic mosquito-borne virus endemic to the Torres Strait which was detected in February 2022 in piggeries across Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia.

Key facts:

- 23 infected pig properties confirmed in Victoria including - Gannawarra, Campaspe, Moira, Loddon, Wangaratta, Greater Shepparton, Greater Bendigo and Northern Grampians.
- 9 confirmed and 3 probable human cases of JEV
- Australian Government invested \$69 million into the JEV response
- AUSVETPLAN recommended destruction of animals, but this was not implemented in its entirety

Agriculture Victoria subsequently lifted movement controls on piggeries on 5th July 2022.

The detection of exotic pests, weeds and diseases in Australian jurisdictions is a continual reminder of Australia's susceptibility to biosecurity incursions and highlights the persistent need to protect Australia's primary industries.

Case study: Khapra beetle (*Trogoderma granarium*)

As Australia's second National Priority Plant Pest, and number one plant priority pest for grains, khapra beetle threatens Victoria's status as the second largest producer of grains in Australia, and the \$3 billion Victorian grains industry (2019-2020). An incursion of khapra beetle could cripple the Victorian grain, dried fruit and nut industries, causing up to 75% losses in grain through direct feeding and contamination of stored grain.

Key facts:

- \$14.5 million investment in biosecurity controls by the Australian Government
- Detected in interstate consignments of imported whitegoods in August 2020, highchairs in October 2020 and mixed retail goods
- Agriculture Victoria works in partnership with the Australian Government in continued surveillance.

Currently, Victoria remains free from khapra beetle.

a. The adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness, with respect to foot-and-mouth disease and varroa mite

Foot-and-mouth disease (FMD)

The recent incursion of FMD in Indonesia and Timor-Leste underscores a need for sustainable, ongoing funding mechanisms that can be immediately implemented to enhance biosecurity preparedness.

The VFF welcomed the Australian Government's injection of \$14.4 million into the Indonesian cooperation package, but notes that this funding must have been allocated prior to July 2022, considering the outbreak of FMD in May 2022, and simultaneous incursion of lumpy skin disease prior to this time. Further, the Victorian farmers were disappointed in the Australian Government's perceived lax installation of foot mats and increased screening measures at the international border. Due reflection must be made by the Inquiry on the slow timing of responses by government in the lead up to the possible incursion of FMD and LSD. Steps must be to ensure any future biosecurity threats that resides so close to Australia are addressed in a timelier manner.

In line with the NFF submission to the Inquiry, the VFF is calling for a two-fold approach to stakeholder engagement, where Australia continues to construct critical, strategic partnerships with neighbouring nations in the Asia-Pacific, as well as conducting greater domestic stakeholder engagement with state farming organisations, noting that farmers comprise the frontline of a biosecurity incursion. Moreover, Victoria is more susceptible to an incursion of foot and mouth disease given its temperate climate and higher rainfall, which has consequently led to a greater proportion of intensive animal production systems².

Finally, VFF members have broadly expressed their support for the implementation of a temporary container levy to ensure there is access to greater funding to assist Indonesia in managing the outbreak of FMD in their country.

Varroa mite (*Varroa destructor*)

Previously, the 2018 varroa mite incursion in Victoria was swiftly eradicated by the Australian Government in partnership with the Victorian government. Detection of another species of varroa mite in Queensland prompted eradication in 2016, 2019 and 2020 under the National Varroa Mite

² Capon, T.R., Garner, M.G., Tapsuwan, S., Roche, S., Breed, A.C., Liu, S., Miller, C., Bradhurst, R. and Hamilton, S., 2021. A simulation study of the use of vaccination to control foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks across Australia. *Frontiers in veterinary science*, p.873.

Eradication Program³. The 2022 detection of varroa mite at the Port of Newcastle has since resulted in an eradication program, accompanied by an \$18 million compensation package for beekeepers funded by the Australian and NSW governments⁴. The VFF believes that the provision of compensation from the Australian and NSW governments for beekeepers within eradication zones provides the necessary support to impacted parties to withstand the impact of hive and equipment destruction incurred by the varroa mite outbreak.

In Victoria, almond pollination is a critical time for almond growers, as well as those delivering pollination services. In the Sunraysia region, up to 200,000 hives are required to pollinate crops during August every year. Comprising 61.3% of Australian almond production in 2020⁵, an industry valued at \$524 million, and Victorian almond exports totalling \$454 million in 2019-2020, continued biosecurity preparedness in shared partnership between state and the Australian governments is paramount to continuing Victoria's stead as a leading export state.

Currently, Victoria is free from varroa mite. However, movement controls have been implemented in Victoria and the Sunraysia region to protect the honeybee population from affected bees and bee products following the detection of varroa mite in bee colonies in New South Wales.

- Permit system introduced, where permits may be granted if meeting criteria 14 days before consignment including the sugar shake test, alcohol wash test, marking inspected hives, etc.
- Reporting of movements from Sunraysia to Agriculture Victoria within 24 hours of movement
- Bees, hives, bee products and used beekeeping equipment from New South Wales have been banned

Agriculture Victoria continues to monitor the situation.

³ Business Queensland, 2022. Varroa mite. Accessed at: <https://www.business.qld.gov.au/industries/farms-fishing-forestry/agriculture/land-management/health-pests-weeds-diseases/pests/invasive-animals/prohibited/varroa-mite>

⁴ NSW Rural Assistance Authority, 2022. NSW Varroa Mite Response Program. Accessed at: <https://www.raa.nsw.gov.au/grants/varroa>

⁵ Australian Almonds. Almond Insights 2020-2021. Accessed at: https://australianalmonds.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021_Almond_Insights_soft_copy.pdf?v=6cc98ba2045f

a. Response to and implementation of previous reports into biosecurity

National Biosecurity Strategy⁶

The VFF welcomed the recent release of the National Biosecurity Strategy, as this illustrates the importance of shared responsibility in the biosecurity landscape. The VFF agree that a national approach to biosecurity must be undertaken to mitigate current threats, safeguard the farming landscape and adapt to the changing biosecurity environment. However, the VFF appreciates that Australia's national biosecurity framework is a complex system, and success or performance of any national strategy is difficult to quantitatively measure.

Matthews Review⁷

Previously, the Matthews Review, commissioned by the Australian government demonstrated that the 2009 DIVA (Differentiating Infected from Vaccinated Animals) Exercise, Victoria's response to an FMD outbreak would likely follow disease eradication protocols, where stamping out, or destruction of animals was followed by an extensive vaccination program in areas housing dairy cattle in high densities. Despite the substantial amount of time required for the vaccination program, this was still considered a more suitable alternative to destruction and disposal under the AUSVETPLAN.

However, inefficiencies including securing sufficient trained personnel, access and identification of burial or incineration sites and carcass transport logistics highlighted by the exercise conducted in 2009, were similarly encountered in 2022 FMD preparedness discussions, indicating continual dysfunction in the biosecurity continuum.

⁶ DAFF 2022. National Biosecurity Strategy, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Canberra, August.

⁷ Matthews, K 2011. A review of Australia's preparedness for the threat of foot-and-mouth disease. Accessed at: <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/sitecollectiondocuments/animal-plant/pests-diseases/animal-pests-diseases/footandmouth.pdf>

b. Related matters

Crown Land management

The management of Crown land and water frontages by the Victorian Government presents a persistent threat to adjoining farming enterprises and could impede the rapid implementation of on-farm biosecurity protocols. With up to 30,000 km of Crown water frontage in Victoria⁸, the VFF believes that unmanaged entry to farm by the general public increases the risk profile of a biosecurity incursion. Moreover, sites assessed as suitable for riverside camping not only present a risk to prospective campers, but require significant compliance with regulation to ensure that risks to the environment are sufficiently mitigated.

Mandatory traceability

Victorian mandates for traceability, accompanied by government subsidies of \$17 million to tag costs through the Sheep and Goat Transition Fund, have encouraged wider adoption of traceability in the sheep and goat industries.

From 1 January 2022, sheep and goats will need to be identified with an electronic NLIS (eID) tag before leaving Victorian properties. Recently, the threat of FMD and lumpy skin disease incursions overseas have seen renewed interest by other Australian jurisdictions for traceability in the livestock sector (cattle, sheep and goats), and the transition from mob-based identification systems to individual identification.

The VFF in unison with the NFF, is calling on the Australian Government to ensure continued investment into technological research and development is prioritised at a national level to support industry-led adoption of traceability technologies.

The VFF commends the Australian Government for its encouragement of the eID program but suggest that the program should be taken further to support preparations ahead of a biosecurity incursion, encouraging the following:

- Developing a singular national database to hold the eID data.
- A national rule set and lead a committee of the state Chief Veterinary Officers to adopt the rule set so there is harmonisation of these rules across the states.
- Work to develop a sustainable funding model for the program – emphasising a model that is co-funded by industry, government, and other major stakeholders.
- No exemptions for sheep and lambs and beef cattle to slaughter in order to encourage greatest traceability during this period of heightened risk.
- Utilise existing technology and infrastructure for the EID program to ensure the most efficient adoption of the program across Australia.

⁸ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, 2017. Crown Water Frontage. Accessed at: https://www.forestsandreserves.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/65361/Crown-water-frontage_A-guide-to-public-access-and-recreational-use.pdf