

National emergency animal disease rapid response team

Callan and Flaherty discuss the RRT concept and its benefits

Abstract

The Rapid Response Team (RRT) concept has been developed to enable the rapid deployment of a control centre in smaller jurisdictions, and to improve national planning, training and preparedness. This development involved selecting, training, and exercising RRT members; developing and testing the activation arrangements; assessing and reporting on the RRT concept; and providing recommendations for its future direction. The RRT concept has resulted in a range of consequential benefits apart from the demonstration that such a team is a necessary and viable strategy.

Introduction

Each State and Territory government is responsible for the safety and well being of its citizens. To this end State and Territory governments have their own police service, fire service, ambulance service, State/Territory emergency service, health services, and agricultural agency. While most people are familiar with the roles and responsibilities of the emergency services, not as many would be as aware of the role agricultural agencies perform in responding to an outbreak of an emergency animal disease, such as foot-and-mouth disease, Newcastle disease or anthrax.

In fact the role of agricultural agencies in controlling an outbreak of an emergency animal disease is not dissimilar to that of a State's rural fire service having to

control an outbreak of fire or the State's emergency services when responding to a severe storm.

Within each State and Territory there is legislation that gives that jurisdiction's agricultural agency the responsibility for the control of agricultural emergencies.

While a jurisdiction's emergency services may perform their legislated emergency role, responding to emergencies on a regular basis, the occurrence of agricultural emergencies is not so frequent. As such, the level of resources developed within each jurisdiction to deal with agricultural emergencies is generally not as high as that of the traditional emergency services.

Developing the concept

The RRT concept has been developed in recognition of a number of factors. Firstly, in any emergency the longer it takes for responders to get organised and have in place a capable control centre the worse the consequences of the emergency are likely to be. Secondly, the agriculture agencies in smaller jurisdictions are less able than their larger counterparts to maintain the full range of specialists that are required to manage a significant animal disease outbreak. Thirdly, nationally there is a substantial group of highly skilled response personnel and by increasing opportunities for their interaction across borders, a great deal can be achieved in the way of national planning, training and preparedness.

The RRT concept captures these factors by seeking to establish a squad of expert responders, drawn from all jurisdictions, who can be flown into any location at short notice to set up a fully functional control centre within 24 hours.

The current RRT project is a trial to form and evaluate an initial team. The Australian Government provided seed funding for this trial with the responsibility for the project residing with the Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF). The strategic direction for this project was provided by a steering committee that consisted of representatives from each State and Territory government, the Australian Government and Animal Health Australia.

The concept of a national "swat squad", although new to the Australian agriculture sector, is not new in other areas, and in its development, the DAFF co-ordinators examined the arrangements that are already in place for a number of similar groups across Australia and overseas. This study included the National Response Team for marine oil spills co-ordinated by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority¹, NSW Rural Fire Service's response teams, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Services response teams, the multi-disciplinary Urban Search and Rescue teams and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Emergency Animal Disease Eradication Organizations (READEOs).²

1 Australian Maritime Safety Authority website, http://www.amsa.gov.au/Marine_Environment_Protection/National_Plan/Contingency_Plans_and_Management/Oil_Spill_Contingency_Plan.asp, viewed 5 May 2004.

2 United States Department of Agriculture, Veterinary Services Emergency Programs website, <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/ep/>, viewed 10 May 2004.



Control centre in Exercise Noonamah

While the concept of the RRT had been discussed for many years, turning this concept into reality was easier said than done. The tasks faced by the co-ordinators were many and varied and included:

- addressing the interests and concerns of jurisdictions that are potentially donors as well as those that are likely to be recipients;
- identifying which positions are essential in an RRT;
- determining how to fill these positions in a multi-jurisdictional environment;
- identifying specific jurisdictional needs, strengths, weaknesses, etc. that may need to be catered for; and
- developing protocols for the operation and deployment of the RRT.

During the 12 months that the RRT was developed and trialed the following activities were conducted:

- selecting RRT members;
- training and exercising RRT members;
- developing and testing the activation arrangements; and
- assessing and reporting on the RRT concept and providing recommendations for its future direction.

Selecting RRT members

The composition of the RRT was determined by the steering committee that identified key management positions within a State Disease Control Headquarters (SDCHQ) or Local Disease Control Centre (LDCC) that could be filled by the RRT. These positions were drawn from the AUSVETPLAN Control Centre Management Manuals³ and represented positions that were essential to the success of an EAD response operation. RRT members were selected against these positions on the basis of prior experience and training, and personal characteristics that would enable them to perform the functions of these positions. The project relied for its success on the acceptance of all jurisdictions of the selection process and their endorsement of and commitment to the participation of the selected personnel in RRT activities over the initial twelve-month period. Despite the evident cost in staff time, all jurisdictions agreed to this significant investment.

Training and exercising RRT members

The training for the RRT centered around three major activities, each of five days duration. They represented a significant

contribution by each member's organisation and the jurisdictions in which the activities were conducted. These activities were:

- briefings and competency training for all RRT members, conducted in Adelaide in November 2003,
- a training and development exercise (*Exercise Noonamah*) conducted in Darwin in March 2004, and
- a further development and assessment exercise (*Exercise Sarcophilus*) conducted in Hobart in May 2004.

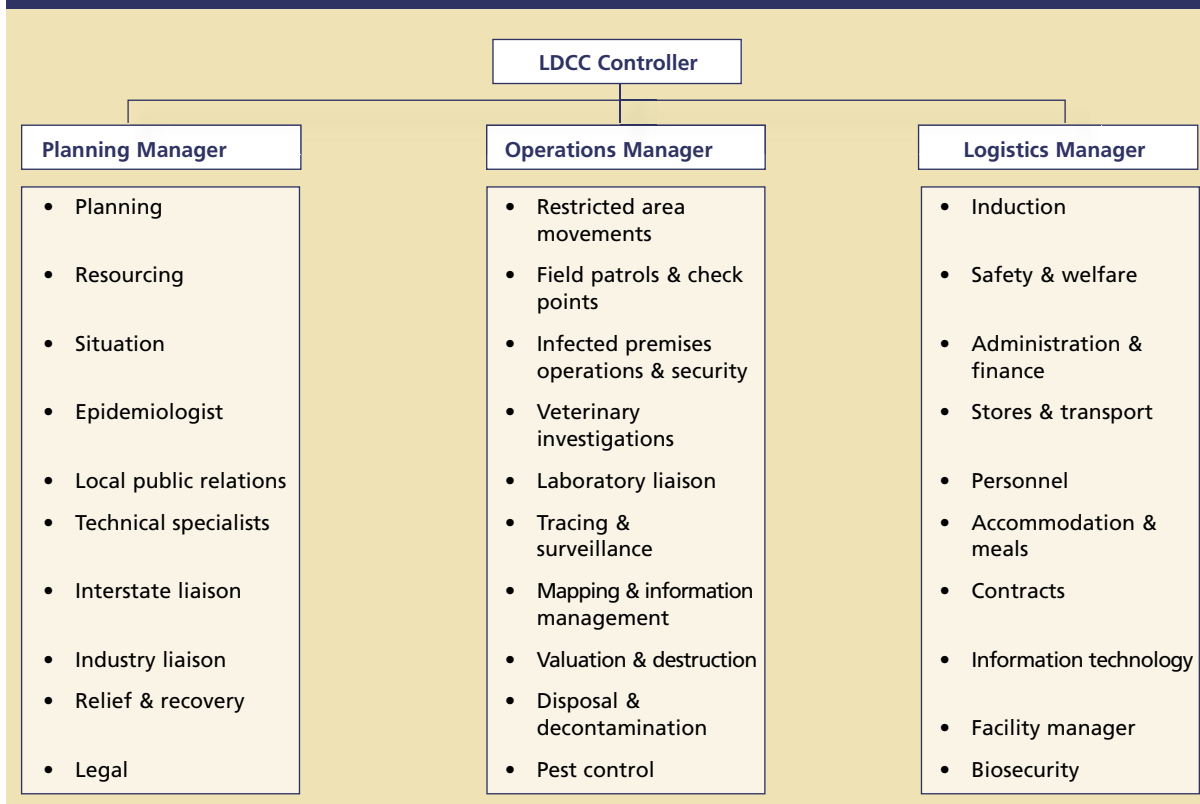
These activities were conducted in potential recipient jurisdictions because it was important that RRT members had a good understanding of the EAD and emergency management arrangements that applied in those host jurisdictions.

In each exercise the host jurisdiction was actively involved in the development of the exercise scenario and the establishment of facilities as well as actively participating in controlling the exercise. Both exercises were conducted as functional exercises, which required the establishment of an LDCC and SDCHQ.

Exercise Noonamah involved 100 participants and control staff, while *Exercise Sarcophilus* involved

3 Animal Health Australia website, <http://www.aahc.com.au/ausvetplan/index.htm>, viewed 5 May 2004.

Figure 1. Local Disease Control Centre (LDCC) structure & functions



Reference: Animal Health Australia (2004) *AUSVETPLAN Control Centres Management Manual, Part 1 Management and organisation of control centres*

more than 150 participants and control staff (including a meeting of their Tasmanian Emergency Animal Disease Inter-departmental Committee).

While the training and exercises were designed to increase the skills and knowledge of the RRT members, there was also a necessity to assess individuals against the EAD competencies as well as evaluate the viability of the RRT as a concept.

Accredited EAD assessors, through summative and formative assessment, assessed individuals where participants were observed performing their role during both exercises, as well as being required to provide evidence as per the EAD competencies.

The RRT was continually assessed throughout these activities using feedback from participants, daily debriefs, exercise debriefs and jurisdictional debriefs, as well as

independent assessment by an outside observer.

Activating the RRT

A range of methods for activation was examined and, due to the various locations of participants, no one method was suitable to all. As such members are activated using email, facsimile and/or telephone (including mobile telephone).

When a jurisdiction identifies that they have, or suspect they have, an emergency animal disease it is incumbent on that jurisdiction's Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) to notify the Australian Chief Veterinary Officer (ACVO). Upon receiving this notification the ACVO convenes the Consultative Committee on Emergency Animal Disease (CCEAD) and provides the RRT co-ordinators with notification that the potential for activation of the RRT exists. This is to be passed on to RRT members. From this notification, members can determine whether

they can be released from their duties, commence the necessary approvals, and prepare to disengage from other activities.

The initial CCEAD meeting determines whether the RRT will be activated. Following this meeting the RRT co-ordinators will be advised of the decision and either stand down the RRT or deploy them to the recipient jurisdiction. The initial RRT could expect to be deployed for around ten days. At the end of that time they would either hand over responsibilities to the jurisdiction or be replaced by another RRT.

Using this procedure, the RRT can be deployed to any jurisdiction in Australia within 24 hours of official notification (following the CCEAD decision). It is anticipated that after briefing and induction by the recipient jurisdiction, members could be working in their nominated role within 36 hours.

Benefits of the development of the RRT concept

The development of the RRT concept has resulted in a range of consequential benefits, apart from the demonstration that such a team is a necessary and viable strategy. The benefits that may not have otherwise arisen include:

- the conduct of major EAD response exercises in two jurisdictions, which has led to an increased level of physical preparedness in these jurisdictions;
- the development of national training material not previously available;
- a highly trained and practiced cadre of EAD professionals across Australia;
- raising awareness that EAD response is a national issue, and not one that can be handled by a single jurisdiction alone; and
- the sharing of knowledge concerning EAD response arrangements across Australia.

The future of the RRT

Following *Exercise Sarcophilus*, an evaluation process has incorporated the views of all stakeholders. A report was made available to the Primary Industry Standing Committee (PISC) providing recommendations on the future of the RRT concept. It is clear that most jurisdictions support the concept in principle but pivotal issues affecting its continuation, such as longer term funding arrangements, remain. The PISC report canvasses options for these issues and provide recommendations for the way forward.

Authors

Tony Callan has been involved in emergency management for 25 years, either as a responder, or in a management role. He was an active volunteer member of the NSW State Emergency Service for 15 years until he commenced work as a District Emergency Management Officer in NSW, a position he held for eight years prior to commencing work with the Dept of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry two years ago. During this time he has been involved in a wide range of emergency responses including Sydney storms and bushfires throughout the 1990's, Merimbula Tornado (1995), Thredbo Landslip (1997), Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race (1998), Mangrove Mt-Newcastle Disease (1999), Wollongong Storm (2001), South Coast Fires (2002), and the Snowy Mountains and Canberra Bush Fire (2003). In his current position he is responsible for ensuring that DAFF has arrangements in place to manage its responses to incidents and emergencies that may impact on the agriculture and aquatic sectors.

Greg Flaherty works in the Emergency Risk Management Unit of the Australian Government Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry. Greg has been involved in emergency preparedness activities since 2000 when he redesigned the Department's generic plan for co-ordination of responses to pest and disease emergencies in Australia's agricultural industries. He was part of the team responsible for the design of the national co-ordination framework for outbreaks of serious animal disease emergencies (such as foot-and-mouth Disease and Mad Cow Disease) and the development and delivery of *Exercise Minotaur*. More recently he has been working on the development of the national emergency animal disease rapid response team concept.