

Statement of Biosecurity Policies and Programs for the Northern Territory

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INTRODUCTION

There are a variety of policies and programs conducted in the Northern Territory which contribute to biosecurity for animal diseases:

- Quarantine barrier managed by AQIS staff;
- North Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) managed by AFFA staff;
- passive disease surveillance;
- permanent mandatory identification of all cattle;
- mandatory waybill for all stock movements;
- feral animal control;
- public health policies; and
- environmental policies.

BACKGROUND

The total area of the Northern Territory is about 1.4 million square kilometres. Approximately one third of the Northern Territory is desert with no livestock except for feral camels at low density.

The cattle industry is the dominant livestock industry with about 1.5 million cattle grazed on about 250 large pastoral properties and about 150 small farms. There are about 15 properties running about 15,000 domesticated buffalo and about 50,000 feral buffalo in the Arnhemland area. There are about 100,000 feral camels grazing the desert areas to the south east and south west of Alice Springs.

There are currently no feedlots or dairies in the Northern Territory. It is unlikely that either will be established due to unsuitable economic and physical environments.

There are two poultry farms (one layer farm with about 75,000 layers and a broiler chicken farm with about 100,000 birds). There is one commercial small piggery. It is unlikely that new poultry or pig farms will be established due to unsuitable economic and physical environments.

There is one export abattoir in the Northern Territory, which did not operate in 2001 or 2002. There is one domestic abattoir (100-200 head a day) and six licenced domestic slaughter houses. All are compliant with the national standards, have a HACCP based quality assurance system with at least two audits per year.

The cattle turnoff is between 400,000 and 450,00 annually. There are about 200,000 live cattle exported annually and about 200,000 slaughter and feeder cattle sent to

other states annually. Slaughters at Northern Territory abattoirs in recent years have been less than 30,000 head.

ENVIRONMENTAL

The Northern Territory has a harsh climate not suitable for many microorganisms and non-adapted animals. The maximum temperature exceeds 30 degrees Celcius for most of the year. There is a long dry season for at least six months in the northern areas with a desert climate in central Australia with a low variable rainfall.

The coastal areas are at risk of introduction of animal disease from sea travellers. Less than 10% of the coastal areas have commercial cattle or buffalo properties. About 40% is unstocked and the remaining 50% has extremely low stocking densities. Consequently the risk of establishment of an animal disease via the northern coastline is low.

Other than at abattoir lairages, export yards and saleyards there are low densities of cattle and buffalo on pastoral properties. Stocking rates on natural pasture (99% of the production system) varies from 5 to 15 head per square kilometre depending on rainfall. In the small areas of improved pasture in the far north stocking rates are one head to two to three hectares.

There are less than 10 cattle sales held annually. There are seven export depots where up to 3000 head are held for up to a week prior to export. Export rejects are easily traced by waybills. It is an offence to remove stock from an abattoir lairage except with permission of the Chief Inspector Stock.

Consequently while the stock in a paddock may become infected with an emergency animal disease there is reduced opportunity for disease spread.

Advice is provided to poultry producers to exclude wild birds from the poultry sheds and water supplies. Underground water with covered tanks is used.

PASSIVE DISEASE SURVEILLANCE

There are four private veterinarians who provide services to the cattle industries. Three veterinarians provide services at export depots prior to the export to treat, inspect and certify animals for export. The fourth provides specific veterinary services to a small number of large producers.

Departmental animal staff provide most of the disease surveillance activities to the commercial industries. 80% of properties are visited by a departmental officer at least once each year. The performance indicator for passive surveillance is to conduct at least 100 cattle disease investigations on at least 50 properties. This is an annual coverage of 20% of commercial cattle properties.

LIVESTOCK IDENTIFICATION AND WAYBILLS

An effective identification and traceback system suitable for Northern Territory production system is in place. Over 90% of cattle and buffalo are sent to export, feedlot or slaughter directly from the property of origin. All cattle must be branded prior to leaving the property and must be accompanied by a waybill. A database of stock movements is maintained based on waybill records.

A Foot and Mouth Disease exercise in May 2001 retrospectively examined the tracing through an export depot (the worst case scenario). All cattle from the property of origin and cattle in the export yard at the time were able to be traced. It was also possible to trace the cattle trucks and the trailers that could have been exposed to infection.

Similarly disease tracing has been successful in twenty-six TB case herds since 1992.

While it is necessary to have electronic individual identification and transaction recording in some production systems, there is little to be gained from a more costly system in the current Northern Territory production system. Over 50% of the cattle turnoff is direct from the property of birth to slaughter or export and an additional 40% staying within the same ownership until slaughter or export.

PUBLIC HEALTH

Surveillance for zoonotic diseases is conducted by disease reporting (notifiable diseases).

FERAL ANIMALS

It is the responsibility of the land owner to control feral animals.

There is a Pest Declaration for the Victoria River area (38 properties) relating to feral horses and donkeys. The owners of the land have the prime responsibility for the removal of the feral horses and donkeys. The Northern Territory government assists by coordination and the provision of trained shooters if requested.

There is an ongoing program on parks controlled by the Parks Management in the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Environment to control large vertebrate feral animals in parks controlled by the Northern Territory.

Similar programs are conducted on parks managed by the Commonwealth.

Targeted aerial feral animal surveys are done periodically. The Northern Territory is a member of the Vertebrate Pests Committee. The responsible agency is the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Environment.

It is estimated that private and public sector costs for feral animal control is about \$500,000.

LEGISLATION

Approximately a half of the Northern Territory is aboriginal freehold land, which is administered by Commonwealth legislation.

The *Pastoral Land Act* provides for the conversion and granting of title to pastoral land and the administration, management and conservation of pastoral land. The major objective is to have a sustainable and productive land resource.

Presently “stock” are controlled under the *Brands Act* and Regulations, *Exotic Diseases (Animals) Compensation Act*, *Stock Diseases Act* and Regulations, *Stock Routes and Travelling Stock Act* and Regulations and the *Control (stock) of Hormonal Growth Promotants Act* and Regulations. There is a current process to consolidate the legislation relating to stock into a single act to provide simple and flexible legislation for animal disease control suitable for the modern industry.

Animals other than stock and endemic animals are controlled by the *Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act* managed by the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Environment. There are strong controls on the entry and exit of animals from approved premises. There is good consultation between the two agencies including emergency animal disease preparedness activities.