

2002 NPPEC  
**Agrosecurity: The Challenge for Public Policy Education**

Conference report

Public policy education in biosecurity involves special challenges. These include the need to: overcome the natural tendency to ignore risk; create awareness without losing public confidence; keep sensitive information away from the “bad guys”; use a multidisciplinary approach; emphasize the need for economic analysis to assess and prioritize the various risks; enhance coordination among federal, state, and local agencies; promote simulated attack exercises as learning experiences; and to evaluate program effectiveness using appropriate indicators.

Terrorism is not a short-term problem. To win the war, two internal enemies must be overcome: complacency and ignorance. Public policy educators have a critical role in keeping the industry, government and the public focused on the risks and the solutions—developing appropriate countermeasures without a loss of public confidence in the system. The threat to the safety and security of our food supply affects us all, making vigilance against bioterrorism everyone’s responsibility.

The U.S. food system enjoys a reputation for delivering safe, quality products in a timely manner at reasonable cost and in abundant supply to consumers. That reputation is built, in part, on the vigilance of producers, processors, retailers and regulators to provide a food supply free of disease or bacteria.

The events of Sept. 11 broadened food safety to the realm of agrosecurity—to limit the potential for intentional, as well as naturally occurring threats to the nation’s food supply and a vital economic sector. No one step achieves agrosecurity; it requires on-going action in multiple areas.

Industry experts and regulators agree that the systems now in place to reduce food-borne pathogens can also be used to prevent or respond to a terrorist attack. Reducing the threat of terrorist attacks on the food system has the added benefit of improving the country’s overall ability to deal with outbreaks of all kinds—natural or deliberate. Any system must include steps to prevent, respond to and recover from any problems.

Extension educators have an important role in helping the public address the challenging public policy issues related to agrosecurity. Policy issues educators are uniquely positioned to accurately interpret this story and objectively assist in developing appropriate public responses.

Issues surrounding agrosecurity were discussed by regulatory officials and Extension practitioners at the 2002 National Public Policy Education Conference (NPPEC) Sept. 16. Extension educators attending the conference identified policy issues on which their work could have an impact, as well as methods they might employ to help stakeholders address those issues. Presentations of the speakers can be found at [www.farmfoundation.org](http://www.farmfoundation.org), the Web site of the conference sponsor, Farm Foundation.

**Policy issues**

Policy issues identified by conference participants included:

*Prevention:*

- 1) Risks: It is critical that we carefully define and prioritize the risks. Understand how to prepare for threats/risks that cannot be fully anticipated in advance. Understand how to communicate different levels of risk. Stakeholders need factual, science-based information.
- 2) Terminology: How a term is defined or used can affect understanding of issues. Commonality of understanding/meaning can reduce confusion.
- 3) On-farm security: Farmers and ranchers need to understand the role of best practices to strengthen on-farm defenses against natural or intentional risks. Undertaking appropriate measures can be viewed as best management, an added expense or a matter of accountability. Voluntary or mandated implementation raises the issue of interference with a private business versus steps to protect the public good.
- 4) Size of operation: When we weigh the costs of best practices against the potential costs of disease treatment and losses, are there different impacts on small, medium or large operations? Does concentration of production increase potential risks?
- 5) Information: Open sharing of information, noted USDA Undersecretary Bill Hawks, is a strength of the United States but a vulnerability when it comes to agrosecurity. a) Emergency responders need accurate information on where crop or livestock production is taking place and at what volume. Creating and maintaining such a database raises privacy issues. b) To make sound decisions, producers, processors, retailers and consumers need information on potential or actual threats. Too much information, or too little, may yield inappropriate responses or erode confidence in the food system. Too much detail may aid potential terrorists. The media can play a crucial role in disseminating information, but the appropriate balance between too much or too little to be risk appropriate must be determined.
- 6) Traceability: The ability to identify specific crops, livestock and any other agricultural goods from point of production throughout the food system can help trace a problem to its origin. However, some farmers and ranchers also view it as a means to make them financially liable for problems not under their control. Again, privacy and information access issues exist.
- 7) Research: Research that yields tools to prevent or control disease eliminates a weapon from the arsenal of Mother Nature or terrorists.
- 8) Community: What is the community's role in supporting on-farm security. What impact does increased on-farm security have on community life, economics or future development?

*Response:*

- 1) Identify potential problems: Producers, veterinarians, Extension personnel, lab technicians, grain handlers, processors and retailers need to know the warning signs of potential problems and to whom they should be reported. Today, responsibility for reporting suspected problems might be voluntary or required by law; that may change with increased agrosecurity concerns. Potential issues include enforcement, access to private property for diagnostic purposes and information to appropriately address the level of risk.

- 2) Response sequence: Clarification is needed of who calls whom when to take what actions and how. Response plans need to be comprehensive, yet flexible enough to address anticipated and unanticipated risks.
- 3) Authority: A timely response requires clear understanding of who has authority to activate a response plan, issue quarantines, restrict movement, order disposal of crops or livestock, or enforce orders. Jurisdictional hierarchy must be clear. Policy issues include the authority to access private property for the purpose of surveillance or diagnosis; the taking of private property; and indemnification.
- 4) Movement restrictions: Free movement is a basic tenet of this nation. Yet restricting movement of people, equipment and livestock/crops is a crucial element of disease control. Who determines when movement is to be limited, to where, for whom or what, and for how long?
- 5) Indemnification: To control disease outbreaks may require destruction of crops or livestock. Prior knowledge of indemnification programs can reduce reluctance by crop/livestock owners to report potential problems. If done in the name of the public good, who should bear the cost of such losses? What role, if any, should private insurance play?
- 6) Disposal of diseased crops/livestock must be done in a timely manner with as little transport as possible. Science-based information is needed to define the most appropriate disposal method. Who has authority to order destruction of crops or livestock must be well defined. Who is to do it and how costs will be covered must also be predetermined.

*Recovery:*

- 1) Protection vs. Trade: Protecting our domestic agricultural industry includes protecting our ability to export goods (25% of all agricultural production). The fact that the U.S. is now putting greater emphasis on homeland security has trade partners nervous. Trade partners want assurance that there will be a free flow of goods across borders.
- 2) Biotechnology: Acceptance and implementation of this technology offer opportunities to develop tools for agrosecurity.
- 3) Impacts: Any attack to the food system will carry psychological and economic impacts. Maintaining or restoring confidence in the food and regulatory system will be crucial. Strategies and methods are needed to mitigate economic losses to producers, processors or retailers.
- 4) Evaluation: Assessing results to improve agrosecurity systems may prevent a repeat of any incidents.

**Education Challenges**

Conference participants identified some challenges for Extension educators as they address policy issues related to agrosecurity:

- 1) Inventory: Identify programs, strategies and information dissemination already being used by commodity groups and state agencies. Enhance these where possible and avoid duplication.
- 2) Sharing: Improve dissemination of policy issues and education tools to all Extension educators to provide effective protection.

- 3) Partnerships: USDA and other federal agencies need to increase partnerships with states and constituency groups to develop policy options and education opportunities.
- 4) Collaboration: Sound educational programs for these complex issues will require work with various professional and disciplinary colleagues to frame useful programs and educate their members on these policy issues.
- 5) Approaches: Policy issues need to be addressed at several levels: by national public leaders; by those within and across the food chain; and the general public. It is important to identify who needs to be involved and what topics can be/need to be effectively addressed.
- 6) Roles: Extension and the national federal response system—USDA, FDA—have focused on technical and regulatory issues. Yet to be addressed are policy issues and the broader framework of a comprehensive agri-biosecurity program. Consider partnering with state departments of agriculture and other agencies.
- 7) Electronic delivery: Web-based tools have the potential to play a critical role in public issues education related to agrosecurity. USDA is funding a pilot project, e-Extension, to develop an electronic-based delivery system to serve a knowledge- and curriculum-based system ([asred.msstate.edu/e-extension/e-extension.htm](http://asred.msstate.edu/e-extension/e-extension.htm)). The Extension Disaster Education Network (<http://www.lsuagcenter.com/eden/>) is a multi-state program to delivery services to people affected by disasters. Linkages are needed with policy education specialists.

### **The Texas Summit Initiative**

An example of how to implement a comprehensive strategy to deal with the policy uses and educational needs surrounding agrosecurity was the Texas Agricultural and Natural Resources Summit Initiative. The Summit is an apolitical forum for the discussion of the critical issues affecting Texas' food, fiber and natural resource systems. It has brought together several thousand Texans representing industry, agriculture, natural resources, and consumers to identify, prioritize and initiate work toward resolution of critical public issues.

Participants at the first summit in 1993 identified 15 critical high-priority issues. Regional mini-summits localized the issues and propose solutions. Annual summits since have addressed food quality and safety, environment and natural resource policy, the 1996 Farm Bill, rice, agricultural finance and risk management, forestry, biotechnology and international trade. The final report of the 2002 summit on biosecurity can be found at <http://agsummit.tamu.edu/Biosecurity/biosecurity1.htm>.

The work of the Summits has influenced the directions of university research, education and extension programs. This process is not intended to resolve the issue, but rather is public policy education.

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