Agroterrorism—Why We're Not Ready: A Look at the Role of Law Enforcement

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About the Author

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Terrorists trying to damage the U.S. economy need look no further than the country's heartland for "soft" targets. Farms, ranches, and feedlots are open and generally unprotected. The majority of State and local law enforcement agencies are financially and strategically unprepared to respond to agroterrorism.

Public health officials may seem like the logical leaders for responding to an attack on the food supplies. However, the laws of many States require that agroterrorism be handled as a crime investigation, giving law enforcement primary responsibility.

State and local law enforcement officials should be asking:

- Are the farms, fields, and feedlots in my jurisdiction protected?
- Do I have a strategy to prevent agro-terrorism?
- Do I have a partnership with ranchers, farmers, meatpackers, truckers, veterinarians, and public health officials?
- Is my agency prepared for agroterrorists?

Agroterrorism experts are especially concerned about the introduction of foot-and-mouth disease into the food supply. Twenty times more infectious than smallpox, the disease causes painful blisters on the tongues, hooves, and teats of cloven-hoofed animals—cattle, hogs, sheep, goats, deer—rendering them unable to walk, give milk, eat, and drink. Although people generally cannot contract the disease, they can carry the virus in their lungs up to 48 hours and

transmit it to animals. The animal-to-animal airborne transmission range is 50 miles.

With millions of farms, open fields, and feedlots in the United States, the introduction of foot-and-mouth disease would require the mass slaughter and disposal of infected animals. An outbreak could halt the domestic and international sale of meat and meat products for years. Foot-and-mouth disease in 2001 in the United Kingdom affected 9,000 farms and required the destruction of more than 4,000,000 cows. Researchers believe that a similar outbreak in the United States would cost taxpayers up to $60 billion.[1]

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) recently funded research into how an agroterrorist attack with foot-and-mouth disease in Kansas would affect the State and the country.[2] The Kansas Bureau of Investigation, the Ford County Sheriff's Department in Kansas, and the National Agriculture Biosecurity Center at Kansas State University conducted the 21-month study. Findings were based on simulated exercises, field surveys, and interviews with law enforcement, livestock producers, meat packers, truckers, feedlot managers, researchers, politicians, and animal health officials.

Of course, agroterrorism is not meant to be an act of violence against livestock but an attack on the economic stability of the United States. The study funded by NIJ identified five groups that could pose threats to our agricultural industry:

1. International terrorists. (Although many animal diseases have been eradicated in this country, they flourish overseas. The foot-and-mouth virus is easily accessed, transported, and transmitted.)
2. Domestic terrorists, including anarchist or antigovernment groups.
3. Militant animal rights groups.
4. Economic opportunists seeking financial gain as a result of a change in market prices.
5. Disgruntled employees seeking revenge.

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Law Enforcement's Role Post-Attack

How would law enforcement be expected to respond to agroterrorism? How would jurisdictional issues be overcome as local, State, and Federal authorities collaborate? Research by NIJ suggests some preliminary best practices.

The first priority of a law enforcement agency would be to establish and enforce a strict quarantine around the affected area. In the case of foot-and-mouth disease, the quarantine would cover a 6-mile radius, 113 square miles, from the point of virus introduction. Experts say that the quarantine would have to be enforced for at least 30 days.

The second priority likely would be Statewide roadblocks to help contain the disease. Local law enforcement, working with the State highway patrol, would stop vehicles at every roadblock. Vehicles that have had contact with livestock would be sent back to their point of origin, and that site would have to be tested for the virus. Other vehicles would be diverted for testing on the spot. Some semitrailers may be allowed to detach the trailer—which would be held for testing—while the cab is decontaminated. Passenger cars would be stopped and the drivers interviewed to determine whether they have traveled through a contaminated area. If they have, the car and the passengers would have to be decontaminated to minimize the risk of transmission.

Law enforcement also would be responsible for primary crime-scene investigation, including collection of tissue from infected animals and an attempt to identify suspects. If not established before the incident, the roles of local, State, and Federal officials

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would have to be quickly agreed upon. All cloven-hoofed animals—domestic and wild—within the affected area would have to be destroyed and disposed of.

Preventing an Attack

Every level of the food chain is vulnerable: farms, feedlots, chemical storage facilities, meatpacking plants, and distribution operations. Because terrorists rely on a lack of preparedness, law enforcement agencies should develop a plan to prevent agroterrorism and to minimize the results of an attack.

Special FBI Agent David Cudmore says, "Identifying threats of agroterrorism and stopping them before they happen are obviously vital roles for law enforcement." Cudmore, a weapons of mass destruction coordinator, adds, "But protecting the Nation's agricultural industry will take combined efforts of the agriculture industry, government, law enforcement, and academic and scientific communities working together to minimize both the likelihood of an attack and the severity of its impact."

Local law enforcement should gather intelligence, for example, by working with livestock producers to identify vulnerable farms and feedlots. Partnerships—the best way to prevent an occurrence of agroterrorism and the only way to contain one—must be created among the local sheriff and farmers, ranchers, meatpackers, truckers, feedlot owners, and other critical members of the food-supply chain in the jurisdiction. Meetings with local chapters of livestock associations and other industry groups can encourage the exchange of ideas. Also, local law enforcement must establish a working relationship with veterinarians and animal and plant health inspectors.

Ron Snyder, program director of AgTerror Emergency Responder Training, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, says, "Because law enforcement officials perform critical functions in an agriculture emergency, it is vitally important that they become knowledgeable in all aspects of this unique type of emergency response. State and local officers are responsible for the establishment and oversight of quarantine areas to control the further spread of disease and maintain order as the response efforts unfold."

In our post-9/11 world, the sharing of information among law enforcement agencies is more important than ever. State and Federal intelligence-gathering groups must collaborate to provide local law enforcement with the information it needs to deal with suspected terrorists. When it learns of a potential threat, for example, the FBI contacts the sheriff in that area. The FBI is also in the process of training experts—a rapid response team with criminologists and epidemiologists. However, local officials should also keep up-to-date on threats of bioterrorism. The World Organization for Animal Health, for example, coordinates information on animal diseases. (See www.oie.int.)

Resources

Cudmore says, "Seeing, hearing, and reporting are critical steps to gathering the intelligence that would hopefully prevent an attack. There are five countermeasures that are recommended to prevent this type

of threat to our economic infrastructure: intelligence, surveillance, rapid diagnosis capabilities, rapid incident response, and training."

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security maintains information on potential terrorist threats. The FBI runs the Terrorism Threat Investigation Center, where names and license information can be checked. Local law enforcement agencies have access to both databases. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a number of programs that concentrate on identifying foreign animal diseases. Nationally recognized experts can also help local law enforcement agencies create a prevention and response plan. Undersheriff James Lane, of the Ford County Sheriff's Department in Kansas, often visits local law enforcement agencies to work with their response teams.

Several colleges around the country offer training to improve law enforcement's ability to respond to agroterrorism. Resources are available from the federal government—especially the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security—to help local agencies with training. For example, Homeland Security, working with Iowa's Kirkwood Community College, has developed the first accredited course for law enforcement officers and other first responders to prepare them for agroterrorism. The course is available at www.agterror.org. Kirkwood also offers a "train-the-trainer" program on foreign animal diseases.

The FBI hosts an international gathering of law enforcement officials, scientists, academics, and agricultural professionals to discuss intelligence sharing and agroterrorism. For more information on the International Symposium on Agroterrorism, go to www.fbi-isa.org.

The National Institute of Justice sponsored the Terrorism Research Symposium on June 12–13, 2006, which covered a wide range of research on antiterrorism.

The paradigm for protecting the Nation changed after 9/11, focusing attention on all aspects of infrastructure that require greater security. Preventing an agroterrorism attack will require a concerted, coordinated effort by all levels of law enforcement. The National Institute of Justice is committed to helping sheriffs and other local law enforcement first responders develop a prevention plan and a response plan to mitigate the impact of agroterrorism.

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Notes

1. USDA, *Economic Impact of a Foreign Animal Disease (FAD) Outbreak Across the United States*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC: 2004.
2. Knowles, T., J. Lane, G. Bayens, N. Speer, J. Jaax, D. Carter, and A. Bannister, *Defining Law Enforcement's Role in Protecting American Agriculture from Agroterrorism,* final report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, Washington, DC: 2005 (NCJ 212280), available at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/212280.pdf.