

## **Communicating and advocating the economic and socio-political dimensions of animal health measures to the stakeholders**

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Fundamental to the success of an animal health program is understanding and acceptance by stakeholders and the general public. Many animal health initiatives which have a long term vision and include the re-setting of current paradigms have failed to succeed because of poor communication and messaging that did not resonate with the public. Animal health interventions that could result in depopulation of large number of animals or in enforcing strict trade measures are seen by the public through an economic lens rather than through a global disease control lens. Stakeholders, and the general public, can often fail to appreciate the big picture benefits of regulatory interventions which are instrumental in preventing the disruption of trade, and contribute to industry prosperity. Actions taken by a country depend on the disease status of that country. For example, an existing disease-free status may necessitate an aggressive stamping out of any incursion to maintain that status. A country with endemic disease status, on the other hand, will need to consider vaccination and other methods to slow the spread and subsequently will apply the best available control measures.

It is essential that stakeholders consider and understand the impact and consequences of allowing a disease to become endemic, versus swift eradication through rapid depopulation. In examining strategies to eliminate or control disease, using credible subject matter experts and/or scientists who can effectively communicate the risks is crucial. Ensuring transparency and articulating the necessity of interventions demands the proverbial 'speaking truth to power' in a language that is easily understood. The reality may be that some producers will be more severely impacted in the short term to allow for greater good of the industry as a whole. The option to have an associated compensation plan to support eradication will promote producer acceptance and compliance.

An important socio-political obligation is to communicate to stakeholders, and to the public, a clear picture of the cost-benefit analysis and how risk will be managed. For example, short term difficulties associated with eradication may be necessary to realise longer term benefits with respect to economic and animal health impacts on the national herd.

A convincing argument to support maintaining a disease-free status should include the following points:

- Emphasising the positive economic impact of maintaining open and viable export markets
- Highlighting the importance of protecting and maintaining the health status of the national herd
- Reminding that Foreign Animal Diseases (FAD) can cause a dramatic loss of production i.e. body condition and animal losses through spontaneous abortions
- Stressing the impact of disease on long term herd health and the associated care costs of allowing endemic spread versus rapid elimination
- Underlining the importance of taking an aggressive approach and rapidly eliminating any infected animals that could serve as shedders and virus factories.

On the other hand, there will be situations where the logistics of stamping out a widespread outbreak may be impossible in the short term. In such cases, employing other strategies such as ring vaccination with subsequent eventual elimination of vaccinated herds to work progressively towards disease-free status may be a more viable option. Vaccination may also be necessary where animal density or logistics associated with culling and rendering do not allow rapid elimination of animals. This may lead to loss of disease-free status of the country for a short time only as the status can be regained with strategic and tactical solutions.

In both circumstances, it is equally important that the socio-political obligation to communicate about the intervention is upheld.

Veterinary education institutions have a responsibility to educate veterinary students to ensure there is an understanding of the social and economic implications of animal health interventions. Veterinary institutions need to recognise the focus of current veterinarian students concerning ethics and animal welfare. Many current generation students may be instinctively resistant to animal eradication strategies. However, there is a critical need to teach risk management and risk communication principles and strategies as part of veterinary education. This investment in increasing understanding among veterinary students of animal health public policy, including promoting understanding of broader economic principles and basic animal health regulations as well as the scientific basis of animal health regulatory action, will be extremely beneficial in preparing new veterinarians, who then become stakeholders themselves and participants in animal health programs.

Veterinary graduates need to understand the principles and benefits of maintaining export and import markets, national herd health status, and international recognition of disease-free status as well as have a basic understanding of the role of national and international animal and public health bodies. Although the veterinary education curriculum covers aspects of exotic or foreign animal diseases, there is a need to expose students early to FAD exercises, simulations and workshops to promote understanding of science policies and strategic operational approaches. The education of graduates with respect to FAD disease recognition to support early detection and response also needs to include an understanding of the role of government or competent veterinary authorities and when and how to trigger contact with local government offices. This is paramount in ensuring effective early disease control strategies. Finally, preparing veterinarians to be the voice of reason with a solid scientific foundation is critical to providing clear messages to the public and stakeholders. Risk management and communication strategies are best articulated by experts speaking in plain language to calm the socio-political turbulence and reduce anxiety of producers and stakeholders.