



# Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

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## **WSDA trains staff for agroterrorism attack**

**OLYMPIA** – While most of the nation’s attention has been focused on the potential for another terrorist attack on a financial landmark, Washington’s agricultural officials recently spent the day training themselves to respond to a terrorist attack on the state’s food supply.

The scenario was not entirely unfamiliar to those involved in the exercise: an animal health disease is discovered at a dairy farm in eastern Washington. This time, however, instead of one dairy cow with Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE or mad cow disease), which cannot be transmitted between animals, the hypothetical situation involved several animals exposed to foot and mouth disease, which is highly contagious among animals. Although foot and mouth disease (FMD) is not normally fatal, it is very painful and causes severe production loss. It does not represent a human health hazard.

Personnel representing 27 county, state and federal agencies participated in the daylong exercise at Camp Murray.

The primary objective of the agroterrorism exercise, according to Dr. Dan Jemelka, public health advisor for the Washington State Department of Agriculture’s (WSDA) food safety, animal health and consumer services division, was to examine the operational capabilities of the state agriculture department to contain the disease and develop and implement a depopulation and disposal plan.

“Having just dealt with the BSE investigation earlier this year, we had a pretty good idea of what kind of manpower and equipment an incident like this would require,” said Jemelka. “But unlike BSE, foot and mouth disease would need to be rapidly identified and contained. Quarantining the infected and exposed animals and animal products is necessary to stop the spread of disease.”

In 1997, an outbreak of FMD in Taiwan killed almost four million swine. Within two weeks of the outbreak, more than 1,300 farms were affected. The last FMD outbreak in Washington state occurred in 1914 in Spokane. The last outbreak in the United States was in California in 1929.

It is estimated by the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Department of Agriculture that a terrorist-introduced outbreak of FMD could be economically devastating to the U.S. economy, costing as much as \$33 billion.

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Jemelka said another objective of the exercise was to examine WSDA's ability to maintain the round-the-clock staffing and resources a FMD incident would require. Seventeen of the 75 people participating in the drill were WSDA staff, primarily from the office of food safety, animal health and consumer services.

Since the BSE incident, Jemelka has been in charge of WSDA's efforts to form a Reserve Veterinary Corps, which trains veterinarians and veterinary technicians in animal health emergency management. So far, 40 veterinarians and veterinary technicians have enlisted in the reserve corps.

"In a real event we would be calling them immediately to provide back-up and relief to our four field veterinarians and veterinary technician," Jemelka said. "A number of questions and concerns that came up (during the exercise) about education; traffic control -- including people, family, employees, and vehicles; and other things that would need to be done would require their assistance. Also, other agency personnel familiar with the livestock industry, such as the Livestock Identification/Brand program, would be a tremendous help and would be called in."

Washington has not received any specific terrorist threat against agriculture. But an incident in June at an Enumclaw dairy, in which several cows were splashed with a toxic substance, was originally investigated as a possible ecoterrorist attack. Although it was eventually determined the contact was accidental, the event underscored the need for WSDA workers to be trained to identify and respond to potential man-made threats.

"Since the last time the state department of agriculture did an FMD exercise with a terrorism-based scenario, many things have changed in the agriculture sector due to the heightened awareness of the threat agroterrorism/ecoterrorism poses to the vital agriculture infrastructure," said Ken Parrish, WSDA's homeland security coordinator. "Our FMD exercise provided us our first opportunity to discuss and test how we would respond and carry out recovery activities using the new National Response Plan, which was drafted in response to the events of Sept. 11 and is currently being implemented by states nationwide."

Parrish said the next step for agriculture officials is to develop an Improvement Plan, correcting any gaps in the current response plan. Once the plan is revised and updated, WSDA staff and others will be trained on the new procedures and likely tested in another exercise.

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