

POST-FARM BIOSECURITY

AUSTRALIA ON THE FRONT FOOT

The Australian wool industry's strong export orientation places the industry at significant risk should Australia face an outbreak of an emergency animal disease (EAD) transmitted by wool. While Australia's biosecurity framework is already strong by international standards, the Australian wool industry is strengthening its arrangements to control or eradicate EADs should they enter the country.

AWI is continuing its investment in RD&E activities to better prepare the wool industry to respond to an emergency animal disease such as foot-and-mouth disease (FMD).

A new three-year plan, *Protecting the Australian Wool Pipeline: Post-Farmgate Emergency Animal Disease Preparedness RD&E Strategy 2019/20 – 2021/22* has recently been developed by AWI in conjunction with the Wool Industries Australia Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) Working Group.

The main goal of the strategy is to ensure that, in the event of an EAD, the normal business of the wool industry would be resumed as rapidly as possible.

DEPENDENCE ON EXPORTS INCREASES EXPOSURE

The Australian wool industry is highly dependent on exports, and China is by far our biggest customer, buying more than 75 per cent of our wool. Conversely, the international wool trade is highly dependent on Australian supply, which accounts for around 70 per cent of the world's Merino wool.

An economic study in 2013 estimated that an outbreak of FMD in Australia could cost the wool industry \$2.2 billion in lost earnings alone.

"The outbreak of African swine fever in China and other parts of Asia has been a stark reminder of the devastation that can be wreaked by an emergency animal disease," said AWI's Program Manager Sheep Health and Welfare, Bridget Peachey. "It has wiped out around a quarter of all the world's pigs.

"Thankfully, our sheep are not threatened by African swine fever, but there are several other diseases that could cause great damage to the wool industry were they to enter Australia."

For sheep producers, the biggest fear is FMD. The United Kingdom and South Africa are two countries that have experienced the terrible consequences of FMD in recent years.

China suspended imports of raw wool from South Africa in February this year after the disease was diagnosed in the north of the country.

As of late August, there remained considerable confusion about what the South African wool industry needed to do to meet health certificate requirements for China.

China has since confirmed that it requires South African raw wool to comply with agreed international standards in regard to the length of storage time at particular temperatures, to ensure any FMD virus particles have been deactivated. Remarkably, the main warehouse of the largest broker in South Africa has been newly insulated and heated to expedite this process.

POST-FARMGATE EAD PREPAREDNESS RD&E STRATEGY

The activities foreshadowed in the new AWI / Wool Industries Australia three-year RD&E plan are focused on addressing any post-

farmgate gaps in Australia's ability to rapidly provide certified, safe wool to the international market during and after an EAD outbreak.

"EAD outbreaks are chaotic events," said Bridget Peachey. "People are desperately trying to stop a new disease in its tracks, which means tracing infected or exposed animals or materials as fast as possible and trying to get ahead of the disease spread.

"Wool is non-perishable, which is both an advantage and disadvantage. It can be stored until it is considered safe to ship – but for this reason, resuming wool exports may not be a top priority for authorities who are focused on the disease response itself.

"We have to make it as simple as we can to help governments get wool exports flowing again if the worst was to happen."

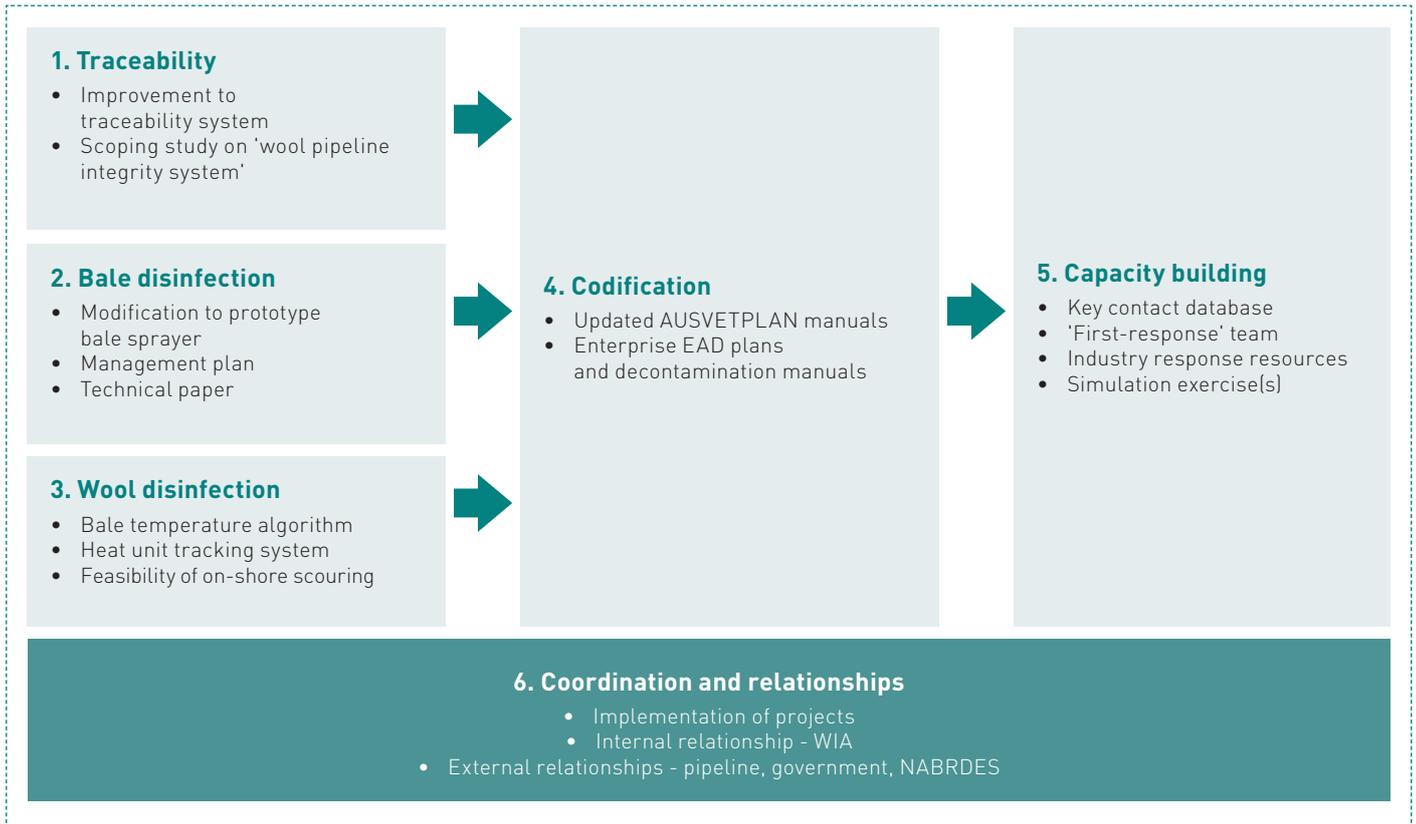
The RD&E plan continues the six programs of work set out in the previous plan (see figure right).

Program 1 (Traceability) is concerned with traceability of wool through the pipeline. A previous study showed that baled wool could be readily and accurately traced through the pipeline from farm to market, but also that some modifications – for example, the linking of the Property Identification Code (PIC) to wool



The Australian wool industry has a robust strategy to minimise the potential trade impacts on the industry if an outbreak of an EAD was to occur in Australia.

Overview of the six programs of work set out in the Australian wool industry Post-Farmgate Emergency Animal Disease Preparedness RD&E Strategy



bales – would make traceability quicker and more efficient. The PIC can now be captured in the classer's specification and transmitted as the wool moves through the pipeline.

"One proposal in the new plan is to look at whether the wool traceability 'system' can be standardised and packaged in a similar way to the National Livestock Identification Scheme, to give it the same credibility with government authorities and trading partners," said David Michell, Chair of the Wool Industries Australia EAD Working Group.

Programs 2 & 3 (Bale & Wool Disinfection) are concerned with ensuring that the external surface of wool bales, and the wool inside them, can be demonstrated to be free of any possible infection.

David Michell says that AWI funding had led to the development of a prototype 'bale sprayer'.

"We have a prototype device that has been shown to allow the rapid disinfection of bales in stores, and detailed engineer's drawings that would allow us to rapidly construct more devices should the need arise.

"AWI has also funded research to look at temperature gradients within wool bales and in relation to the external temperature. This is important work, because we know how long wool needs to be exposed to various temperatures to deactivate (for example) FMD virus.

"This research has captured international attention," said David Michell, "and a collaborative project between Australian and South African researchers, to further

explore the impact of the time*temperature relationship on the survivability of EAD agents in wool is being investigated."

Program 4 (Codification) is concerned with ensuring that all of the plans, processes, procedures and other documentation that come into play during an EAD contain the most up-to-date information. Once again, significant advancements have already been made in this area over the past few years, notably with the publication of a specific Wool Enterprise Manual as part of the AUSVETPLAN EAD response framework, which is managed by Animal Health Australia.

"The Wool Enterprise Manual contains all of the information needed to understand, for example, how wool flows through the value chain, how it can be traced, the various participants in the chain (brokers, testing laboratories and so on) and their roles in a response.

"It will be a very important resource, especially for government officers managing the response to an EAD outbreak."

A priority for the upcoming three years is **Program 5 (Capacity Building)**.

"The best systems, plans and equipment in the world won't help us much during an EAD outbreak if industry does not have well-trained, well-prepared people to put them into practice," said Bridget Peachey.

Program 5 will see the post-farmgate part of the wool value chain collaborating closely with WoolProducers Australia, which would have official industry responsibilities during an EAD outbreak.

Activities under the program may include the development of industry response resources such as fact sheets and videos for wool stores and other post-farmgate businesses. Another proposal is to consider establishing a small industry EAD 'first-response' team, from across the industry, which would be trained and regularly updated in EAD preparedness and would play a key role in industry liaison in the event of an EAD outbreak affecting wool.

"The industry has worked very collaboratively to develop this 3-year strategy," said David Michell.

"A lot has been achieved over the last few years to improve our EAD preparedness, and the new plan provides us with a path to make even further improvement."

MORE INFORMATION
The new 3-year strategy is available at www.wool.com/biosecurity

