Bioterrorism: A threat without borders

On Nov. 9, 2001, President George W. Bush established a Task Force on Citizen Preparedness in the War on Terrorism. The task force will recommend ways Americans can prepare for a possible terrorist attack and will support state and local officials in efforts to prevent and respond to such an attack.

The task force’s creation reflects that terrorism has become a reality for America. After last year’s anthrax cases, use of chemical or biological weapons is one of the most feared threats in America — and the world. Responding to the threat of bioterrorism will require cooperation across national boundaries and levels of government.

“Suddenly all of us are engaged in a war that ignores national boundaries and levels of government. ‘We are all at risk — in states, cities, towns and neighborhoods. We must work together to prevent and respond to the threat of terrorism,’” said John R. Bolton, undersecretary for arms control and international security at the U.S. Department of State, at the Biological Weapons Convention in Geneva in November. “To address this threat globally, U.S. officials presented a proposal to strengthen the international agreement.

Domestically, much of the burden for bioterrorism preparedness falls to state and local governments. Coordination among agencies and funding are critical challenges.

Bioterrorism and emergency communications will cost states $43 billion in the first year of implementation of the homeland-security measures called for by the Bush administration, according to preliminary figures released in December by the National Governors’ Association.

Biological Weapons Convention

The Biological Weapons Convention serves to prevent countries from developing, producing, stockpiling or obtaining the means to employ bacteriological, biological or toxin weapons as a means of warfare. Activated in 1976, the convention now has 143 member states. The United States proposed strengthening the convention in November 2001. U.S. proposals included:

• to enact national criminal legislation to enhance member states’ bilateral extradition agreements with respect to biological-warfare offenses and to make it a criminal offense for any person to engage in activities prohibited by the convention
• to develop strict standards for the security of pathogenic microorganisms
• to agree to international investigations of suspicious disease outbreaks and/or alleged biological warfare incidents
• to adopt and implement strict biosafety procedures, based on World Health Organization or equivalent national guidelines
• to provide rapid emergency medical and investigative assistance, if requested, in the event of a serious outbreak of infectious disease and to indicate in advance what types of assistance member states would be prepared to provide.

Source: U.S. Department of State

Magdalena Moek, Public safety: Coordination is key

Public safety agencies, especially emergency management services, coordinate among other agencies when preparing for and responding to acts of bioterrorism. Constant communication among key decision-makers is critical.

National Governors’ Association. As federal, state and local officials gear up to secure the homeland, this article looks at preparedness in regard to three potential targets of bioterrorist attack — the nation’s population, agriculture and water supply. But first, no matter what the target, the role for coordinating communication and response falls to public safety officials.

Source: National Emergency Management Association, December 2001

State planning and coordination

Critical areas of planning and coordination for states in preparing for chemical and biological attacks

1. Mass casualty capability. Hospitals and health care providers should have appropriate and adequate resources to respond to an incident, and government agencies should have processes to coordinate the medical response and respond to those hardest hit first.

2. Intelligence sharing. The right people need to know the right information at the right time, and reciprocal sharing agreements should be established both vertically and horizontally across governmental agencies and responders.

3. Interstate mutual aid and regional planning. States should take advantage of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact to assist one another in responding to catastrophic events, whether natural or man-initiated. Regionally, states should plan and strategize for preparedness and response, recognizing the unique cultural, geographic or resource benefits and limitations of their region.

4. State coordination. Adequate communication and coordination needs to occur between the states, federal government and local communities. Federal agencies, which often require certain audits and assessments of state preparedness and planning, should coordinate information and requests and streamline bureaucracy, eliminating red-tape for states.

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— Magdalena Mook

Public safety: Coordination is key

Public-safety agencies, especially emergency management services, coordinate among other agencies when preparing for and responding to acts of bioterrorism. Constant communication among key decision-makers is critical.

"Information is the best tool, not only for the public, but the government coordinators as well," said Kentucky Rep. Tom Burch, who sponsored legislation that would require state and local agencies to collaborate on bioterrorism preparedness and response planning. “Coordinating information between health services, the National Guard, law enforcement and emergency management is critical to responding quickly and efficiently.”

In recent years, states and communities have taken steps to develop emergency management plans — step-by-step procedural policies to be used in the event of a bioterrorist attack. All states had emergency management bodies in place prior to Sept. 11 and since then several states have developed new and innovative bodies aimed at terrorism.

Following the federal government’s example, 14 states have established offices or advisory positions for homeland security. Eighteen states have set up task forces, commissions or advisory groups specifically to address terrorism.

Many state legislatures have proposed or enacted sweeping legislation to prevent terrorism. States tackled legislation on terrorism and bioterrorism in 2000 and 2001 and are gearing up with bills in 2002. For example, in 2001 Kentucky criminalized the use of weapons of mass destruction. New York is considering a bill to define biological terrorism as a crime and require life-without-parole or death sentences for those convicted.

With federal resources focused on seeking out those responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks and preventing potential future attacks, states have picked up law-enforcement duties that traditionally fall to federal officials. This is an increasing burden on the states financially, especially in a year of budget and state revenue shortfalls. In addition, state and local law enforcement agencies find themselves competing with private security firms for staff.

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State entities established to address terrorism

Homeland security offices or advisory positions

Terrorism task forces, commissions or advisory groups

States in both categories

Source: National Emergency Management Association, December 2001
Public health: The weakest link?

Health care, considered the nation’s frontline defense in the event of a bioterrorist attack, in reality may be the weakest link. Where a system’s ability to handle a large increase in patients has been squeezed over the past decade by managed care and government cost cuts, State Trends states that local health departments also have been doing more with less. “Public health has traditionally been underfunded,” said Dr. James Hodge of the Center for Law and the Public’s Health. “A bioterrorist attack would expose the weaknesses in the system very quickly.”

State and local health departments are addressing serious short-comings in public health infrastructure. The system of facilities, laboratories and personnel necessary to detect and respond to a disease outbreak is not prepared. A 1999 federal survey found that half of local public-health departments lacked Internet service, and only one in five had e-mail capabilities. To improve its bioterrorism readiness, the Texas Legislature recently authorized the state Department of Health to redirect $6 million toward hiring more epidemiologists, improving its disease-surveillance network and laboratories, and expanding staff training. “The Homeland Security Task Force is also looking to establish 10 regional rapid-response teams to handle bioterrorist attacks,” said Texas Rep. Arlene Wohlgemuth. 

Funding. Increased funding is most crucial to preparedness. Without additional money, state health departments will lack the equipment and personnel to protect the public’s health in the case of a bioterrorist attack. “The biggest question is who pays the bill,” said Georges Benjamin, secretary of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. “There has to be adequate funding to build the continued capacity to respond.”

— John Mountjoy

Model State Emergency Health Powers Act

The Centers for Disease Control asked the Center for Law and the Public’s Health at Georgetown and John Hopkins universities to draft the model act. On Oct. 23, the act would permit authorities in the event of a public health emergency to:

• Quarantine large numbers of people
• Seize control of hospitals and other facilities
• Mandate examination, vaccination and/or treatment
• Destroy contaminated articles or property
• Monitor, track and share health care information
• Ration medical supplies
• Charge those who refuse to comply with emergency measures with a misdemeanor crime.

The model act is available at www.publichealthlaw.net.

Improving public-health infrastructure. State and local health departments also have been doing more with less. “Public health has traditionally been underfunded,” said Dr. James Hodge of the Center for Law and the Public’s Health. “A bioterrorist attack would expose the weaknesses in the system very quickly.”

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Most feared bioterrorism threats

• Anthrax
• Smallpox
• Cholera
• Plague
• Ebola virus
• Botulism
• Tularemia

For more information on biological or chemical agents, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Web site at www.bt.cdc.gov/Agent/Agentlist.asp.

Water supplies: Unlikely but deadly threat

Though experts think the threat of chemical and biological attacks on the nation’s water supplies is minimal, policymakers and utilities are preparing for the possibility.

Harmful microbiological agents can be introduced to water supplies at the source, such as a reservoir, treatment plant, or water-distribution system. An attack on the water supply could be deadly. “The ideal waterborne agent of bioterrorism would be treated and measures used to detect and destroy pathogens at drinking water treat- ment plants. Contami- nation water most like- ly would be treated before reaching the public.”

Still, more research is needed on harmful microbiological agents. The Centers for Disease Control and Preven- tion is investigating the viability and resistance of potential waterborne agents, including smallpox, anthrax, botulism, tularemia and hemorrhagic fever viruses.

To guard against the worst, many cities such as Baltimore are adding security measures and guards at water-treatment plants. “Because of our population bases, American cities are the frontlines of any possible terrorist attack, biological or other- wise,” said Baltimore Mayor Martin O’Malley. Some states are assisting municipalities in the costly task of fortifying security.

In preparation for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games Feb. 8-24, Utah, with the help of the FBI, employed planes and satellites to identify places where it can tighten reservoir security.

At the federal level, congressional pro- posals include funding for research into technologies for prevention, detection and response needed to protect drinking-water sources, treatment plants and distribu- tion systems. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the American Water Works Association have jointly introduced water supplies are unlikely to be compromised by terrorist threats. The EPA Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water has about 30 staff members, 100 contractors, 100 tools to assist- ing workshops and assess- ing additional personnel training, according to the AWWA. Lack of information impedes the safety of water supplies, said Jim Snyder, a con-
Bioterrorism and terrrorism bills
• Kentucky: Passed HB 1 in 2001 to criminalize terrorist threatening and the use of a weapon of mass destruction. The General Assembly will consider HB 914, which requires various state and community agencies to collaborate on a strategy preparing for and responding to a terrorist act involving chemical or biological weapons.
• New York: SB 5811, currently under consideration, creates the crime of biological terrorism. A person convicted of biological terrorism shall be sentenced to life in prison without parole or death, even if biological terrorism does not cause the death of another person.

Florida: The Legislature formed a committee to address the issues of security, preparedness and planning, and biological and chemical attacks and agroterrorism. A package of bipartisan supported bills was expected in 2002.

Michigan: The Legislature passed three bills (SB 497, SB 498 and SB 675) in 2001 that specified penalties for the use of chemical or biological weapons or the threatening of attack or even a hoax.

States can pass all the legislation and regulations they want regarding terrorism preparedness and response, but without adequate funding they will be empty laws.

Public health: The weakest link?
Health care, considered the nation’s frontline defense in the event of a bioterrorist attack, in reality may be the weakest link. The system’s ability to handle a large increase in patients has been squeezed over the past decade by managed care and government cost cuts. In most areas of the country, there are gaps between hospital beds, pharmaceutical and medical supplies, laboratory facilities or personnel necessary to detect and respond to a disease outbreak.

A 1999 federal survey found that half of local public health departments lacked Internet service, and only one in five had e-mail capabilities. To improve its bioterrorism readiness, the Texas Legislature recently authorized the state Department of Health to redirect $6 million toward hiring more epidemiologists, improving its disease-surveillance network and laboratories, and expanding training staff. “The Homeland Security Task Force is also looking to establish 10 regional rapid-response teams to handle bioterrorist attacks,” said Texas Rep. Arlene Weithel.

Funding. Increased funding is most crucial to preparedness. Without additional money, state health departments will be forced to reduce the size of facilities, laboratories and personnel and the use of a weapon of mass destruction. Public health: The weakest link?

20 state government news february 2002

Most feared bioterror threats:
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• Cholera
• Plague
• Ebola virus
• Botulism
• Tularia

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Wealthy states also have the financial capacity to respond. “Public health systems and bioterrorism are not the same, but we are looking to establish 10 regional rapid-response teams to handle bioterrorist attacks,” said Texas Rep. Arlene Weithel.

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The AWWA is providing training workshops and assessment tools to assist in identifying utilities to respond to the potential terrorist threat. Many water utilities are implementing additional security measures, including limited access to treatment and storage facilities, closer monitoring of incoming shipments, testing of water-treatment chemicals and additional personnel training, according to the AWWA.

Lack of information impedes the safety of water supplies, said Jim Snyder, a community protection of water supplies.

Two barriers to improved detection of terrorist assaults are the efficient identification of the agent’s presence and the efficient flow of information to those needing it. Quick and portable sensing systems capable of detecting a wide range of biological threats are critical to enabling an appropriate response. For example, a mass spectrometry method, known as MALDI-MS or Matrix-Assisted Laser Desorption/Ionization Mass Spectrometry, sorts and identifies bacterial components. With this instrument, researchers are aiming for pathogen identification in minutes. This technology could lead to advances in food safety, counterterrorism, and air and water quality, as well as health care. These detection technologies do not require moving samples to the laboratories, saving time and money.

For more information on portable detection devices for microbiological agents, such as the MALDI-MS, contact Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (www.pnl.gov/dchpweb/index.htm).

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sultant to the Clinton administration on U.S. and international water systems. The EPA, FBI and the Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies are developing an Information Sharing and Analysis Center, which would provide secure, two-way communication links between the federal government and industry.

Snyder recommends that legislation aimed at protecting the water supply include a liability clause to free contractors from the fear of a lawsuit should they be unable to thwart a terrorist attack.

— Malissa McAlister

Agriculture: Vulnerable but on alert

Experts do not agree whether a chemical or biological attack on American crops or livestock is likely, but one might undermine the U.S. economy and public confidence in government.

The effects of accidental animal-disease outbreaks demonstrate the potential danger. Just last year, Great Britain spent $2.7 billion and killed 4 million animals to control foot-and-mouth disease, which is highly contagious but is not harmful to humans.

The outbreak had a psychological impact on European consumers, who already mistrusted the government’s ability to protect the food supply. A comparable outbreak in the United States could shake Americans’ confidence in our traditionally safe and abundant food supply.

“At least 22 diseases are lethal and highly contagious to humans. They can be transmitted through the air and can survive on soil, clothing or cloth,” Peter Chalk, a terrorism expert at RAND Corporation, wrote in the Feb. 9, 2001, issue of The Journal of Intelligence Review.

These diseases are fairly easy to acquire or produce, can be handled with little danger to the terrorist and can exist in the environment for a long time. Foot-and-mouth disease, for example, can be transmitted through the air and can survive on tires or in cloth, such as clothing. Once introduced, animal diseases could spread in highly concentrated U.S. livestock populations.

State and federal officials are on alert for accidental or intentional disease outbreaks in U.S. livestock populations.

However, federal and state officials, veterinarians and agriculture producers have been on high alert for devastating livestock diseases since foot-and-mouth disease was discovered in Britain last February. Whether an outbreak is intentional or accidental, prevention and response strategies are similar.

Since Sept. 11, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has intensified and expanded its prevention and preparedness efforts introduced last spring. Anti-terrorist activities include increasing inspection personnel at ports of entry, tightening security at agriculture research facilities and coordinating more closely with state and federal agencies and industry organizations.

State officials also are building on their plans for detecting and responding to an accidental outbreak. Some states, including Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, Montana and Nebraska, have developed emergency response plans in case of an outbreak of a foreign animal disease, according to the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture. State agriculture departments will quickly alert farmers and veterinarians to new threats and provide them with information on guarding against accidental or intentional contaminations and recognizing symptoms of harmful diseases.

Kansas passed a law (HR 2468) last April that made it a felony to knowingly infect livestock with disease. In December, the Legislature’s Special Committee on Agriculture recommended expanding the law to include the intentional exposure of plants to disease. Human lives would be endangered if terrorists contaminate livestock with a zoonotic disease—one that originates in animals but can infect humans—such as plague, tularemia, anthrax or brucellosis.

Initial detection of the West Nile virus at the Bronx Zoo suspected birds were dying from West Nile virus five weeks before human cases were detected, but scientists at the Centers for Disease Control disregarded his reports, said Jonathan Tucker of the Monterey Institute of International Studies. The zoonotic disease has killed nine humans and tens of thousands of birds since it was first discovered in the United States.

— Cindy Lackey

Cindy Lackey, Trudi Mathews, Malissa McAlister, Magdalena Mook and John Mountjoy are policy analysts at The Council of State Governments.

Recent natural outbreaks

Avian influenza in Pennsylvania in 1983 tallied $465 million in direct costs and $150 million in lost trade.

Foot-and-mouth disease in Taiwan in 1997 cost more than $5 billion, required the slaughter of four million swine and resulted in a total shut-down of swing exports.

Recent foot-and-mouth-disease outbreaks in Great Britain cost more than $13 billion in lost animals and exports. A similar outbreak in the United States would cost between $54 million and $690 million, excluding the value of lost exports, depending on size and numbers of species involved.

Source: Farm Journal, November 2001

As Mexico promotes its own federalism, interest has risen in cross-border cooperation with U.S. states at the same time as security concerns are tightening border access.

BY CHRIS WHITTLEY

President George W. Bush welcomed Mexican President Vicente Fox to the White House on Sept. 5 with these words: “The United States has no more important relationship in the world than the one we have with Mexico.” Less than one week later, the tragic events of Sept. 11 would compel the administration to shift its foreign policy focus to the war on terrorism.

Despite this shift, it remains clear that the long-term prosperity and security for citizens in both nations requires close cooperation between the United States and Mexico. State government leaders are working with their Mexican counterparts to expand cooperation on environmental management, law enforcement and a broad range of other issues.

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Mexico’s “New Federalism”

The election of Fox as president in July 2000 represented a historic turning point in Mexico’s 200-year political history. After a competitive campaign and an election credited by international observers as broadly fair, Fox was elected under the banner of the Alliance for Change, an opposition coalition headed primarily by the National Action Party (PAN). Fox became the first Mexican president to be elected from a party other than the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) since 1929.

Fox’s election followed a long process of institutional reform, including a significant effort to transfer power from the central government to the states. In 1995, former President Ernesto Zedillo launched a “New Federalism” initiative to reduce excessive centralization and executive control. In a series of policy reforms, substantial powers over public education and health care were handed to state and local government.

These reforms helped transform many of Mexico’s state governments into laboratories for policy innovation and breeding grounds for new political leadership. State governments seized their newfound powers to implement public education programs, promote exports and pursue other programs.

By 1999, three-fifths of Mexico’s population lived in states controlled by opposition party governors, including then-Gov. Vicente Fox of Guanajuato. The political space afforded by the decentralization effort gave opposition parties a chance to

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President Bush welcomed Mexican President Vicente Fox as they reviewed troops during a ceremony at the White House on Sept. 5. State government leaders also are working with their Mexican counterparts to expand cooperation on environmental management, law enforcement and a broad range of other issues. Associated Press photo.