Agroterrorism: Are states prepared?

A recent report by the Midwestern Legislative Conference examines progress and gaps in agroterror preparedness

BY JEFF GRECO

Biological terrorism is no longer an exotic, unfamiliar phenomenon. In the last year and a half, U.S. officials have discovered biological weapons facilities in Afghanistan, confronted a wave of anthrax attacks in this country, and faced the possibility of biological weapon use in Iraq and elsewhere.

Although the threat that biological and chemical weapons pose to the U.S. agriculture industry continues to receive less attention and fewer resources from state and federal policy-makers than other threats, the nation’s agricultural sector remains vulnerable to a variety of terror scenarios that could inflict casualties and severe economic damage.

A recent report by the Midwestern Legislative Conference’s Agriculture Committee tracks the progress Midwestern states have made in addressing the agroterror threat, examines gaps in preparedness and offers ideas for future state actions.

Lack of funds limits efforts

States’ ability to effectively prevent and respond to agricultural terrorism is limited by key concerns, such as poor plant security, inadequate disease-reporting systems and untested emergency response plans, said Iowa Sen. Jack Kibbie.

“Cost is the main problem,” said

Kibbie, who serves as co-chair of the MLC Agriculture Committee with Michigan Rep. Larry Julian. “We’ve had lots of discussion in the Legislature about the issue, as agriculture is certainly an area of great concern in a farm state like Iowa, but it’s been hard to find the funds for critical needs.”

While budget constraints have limited state responses to the agroterror threat, many states have used scarce resources and federal grant money to introduce innovative reforms. Illinois and North Dakota sponsor classes and seminars led by state personnel or private sector security experts to educate agricultural producers. Ohio and Minnesota make security checklists available on the Internet and, in a strategy now common in many states, are working directly with local media to provide producers security-related information.

Representatives from Iowa’s Department of Agriculture disseminate information directly to farmers attending the state fair and other agricultural events. While
no strategy will reach everyone, many Midwestern states have dramatically raised awareness of agroterrorism without straining their budgets.

As states search for low-cost ways to address the threat, many are examining legal reforms that deter terrorists, streamline response efforts and consolidate oversight authority. Many states have found, for example, that their penal codes either ignores acts of agricultural terrorism altogether or prescribed punishments too lenient to serve as an effective deterrent.

Over the past two years, Indiana and Iowa have defined agroterrorism more precisely and reclassified the misdemeanor as either a Class C or Class D felony. Michigan and Indiana, among other Midwestern states, have criminalized lethal threats, and Wisconsin and Iowa are among several states that have revised their civil codes to allow agroterror victims to sue offenders or the groups they represent.

Minnesota and South Dakota have adopted laws that broaden the governor’s powers to quarantine facilities and command state resources and personnel – emergency responses that could be instrumental in limiting the extent of damage caused by an agroterror attack on livestock or crops. And most states have established new lines of communication between state and local emergency management teams, expanding their responsibilities and defining their role in responding to an actual emergency.

All of these efforts demonstrate an unmistakable commitment by many state legislatures to address a threat that few perceived even a few years ago. Still, the report makes clear that a lack of funding hampers efforts to prevent and respond to agroterrorism, and most states are still not well equipped to meet the threat.

Diagnosing, treating diseases

One critical deficiency limiting most states’ response efforts is a lack of qualified personnel to diagnose and treat animal diseases. Most Midwestern states have six or fewer district veterinarians, and funds to hire more have been slow to materialize. Federal grants have allowed many states to hire one or two more animal-health specialists, but officials in most states say that won’t be enough to expand the inspection and education efforts of animal-health departments much beyond what they already are doing.

Emergency management personnel also worry that many veterinarians are not trained to diagnose and treat the kinds of exotic diseases that terrorists might introduce. Similarly, most states lack the capacity to scientifically identify many animal diseases that are not native to North America. Since high-tech laboratory equipment is often cost-prohibitive, states may need to use distant federal facilities, which could delay diagnosis of samples.

Even when personnel are able to conduct limited testing in-state, they often are ill-equipped to handle the deluge of samples that would likely come in a contagious animal-health emergency. A delay could have devastating consequences if, for example, false rumors of an agroterror attack affected commodity prices or emergency management preparations, or if they incited the public to hoard food or take other unnecessary measures.

Communication is key

Perhaps the report’s most troubling conclusion is that a lack of communication still prevents comprehensive action to stop and respond to agroterror events. Certainly, there have been successes: Indiana’s Counter-Terrorism and Security Council, which brings together representatives from the private and public sector – including academics, business leaders, producers and government regulators – has already helped revise the state’s emergency preparedness strategy. Efforts to educate producers, as noted above, have also been successful.

But in many states, there is little coordination between investigative and public health authorities; among state, local and federal officials; and among different jurisdictions.

“State lines should never be a barrier to the enforcement of antiterrorist measures, but we know that it’s a problem that hasn’t really been addressed yet,” Kibbie said.

Many officials say efforts to coordinate a response require the kind of expensive drills and tests that agency budgets don’t currently allow; others have noted the difficulty of coordinating a response with officials from other agencies or jurisdictions when their own policies are still unclear and untested. Almost everyone agrees that better and more frequent communication is key to addressing the agroterror threat, but the report finds that current efforts remain sporadic and fall far short of what might be necessary in a major agroterror event.

The full report, Agricultural Terrorism in the Midwest: Risks, Threats and State Responses, is available at http://www.csgmidwest.org/member_services/Reports/Ag_Terrorism.pdf.

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FY 2004 federal budget

President Bush’s proposed FY 2004 budget includes $20.5 million for the Department of Health and Human Services to protect the nation’s food supply from bioterrorism: $10.5 million to implement a registration system for foreign food imports; $5 million to improve laboratory preparedness; and another $5 million to improve food monitoring and inspections through state contracts and grants.

In addition, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the proposed budget includes “nearly $47 million in new funding to strengthen laboratory security; conduct research on emerging animal diseases; develop new vaccines; create new biosecurity database systems; and continue development of the unified Federal-State Diagnostic Network for identifying and responding to high risk pathogens.” It also increases funding for the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service by $30 million.