

Farm Security - More Serious Than You Think!!

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In our current world of color-coded alerts and concerns about threats from far-flung parts of the globe, the apparent threat to agriculture would appear to be small. But is it really? One of the most significant security concerns for the federal government is agriterrorism. This includes not only the use of plant or animal pathogens to cause disease, but also hoaxes, threats, vandalism, and adulteration intended to cause public fear. The reason it is considered an issue of concern is the “growing realization that chemical or biological attacks against livestock and the food chain are substantially easier and less risky to carry out than those directed at civilian targets (1)”.

While these threats may seem like background noise compared with events on the national or international scene, they nonetheless call for vigilance. In late 2001 the federal government began distributing funds for grants and research activities aimed at developing emergency animal disease prevention, preparedness, response and recovery systems (2) at the state and local level. This process continues even in Michigan. But state, local and federal law enforcement and emergency management responses become active on the local level only after the crisis has occurred. Effective prevention of agriterrorism is a function of preparedness on the farm.

So why does our government believe terrorists would find agriculture an attractive target?

For several reasons: The physical risk to the attacker is significantly lessened. Spreading

a plant or livestock disease pathogen is much safer than spreading human disease pathogens or lethal chemicals. Secondly, these types of attacks can be developed in such a way that it is difficult to detect, which complicates any investigation. The technical barriers for utilizing plant or livestock pathogens are lower as compared with the pharmacological and industrial requirements for developing something like anthrax into a weapons grade material. Collecting and isolating pathogens from infected animals or plants is a comparably simpler task. These plant or animal pathogens could conceivably be sent through the mail or through a customs checkpoint without detection and then delivered by simply dropping them into a feed trough or ventilation system or seed storage. Finally, agriterrorism is not as likely to create the same backlash or response as an act that kills people. Additional factors that come into play are the mobility and concentrated nature of crops and animals in the U.S. (2), which leads to a situation where the possibility of an attack is more likely transformed into a probability over time.

What makes the overall risk greater are the potential candidates who might be interested in attacking U.S. agriculture. In the main stream media, international terrorist threats to U.S. interests make the most news. In reality, as good a case can be made for anti-government groups wanting to disrupt society, sociopaths wanting to incite panic, those with an economic motive such as causing trade restrictions and more ominously those with an ideological cause such as radical environmentalism or animal rights (2). These latter groups are the most worrisome points of concern. They are people who look and talk just like you and your neighbors. They will not be obvious, and they will come with a plan for trouble.

As indicated previously, local, state, and federal authorities will only be in position to react to terrorist threats and activities after they occur. So it is in the interest of those within agriculture to become part of the preventative solution before a terrorist incident occurs. How do we accomplish that? The answer is in the hands of the farm owner, as well as those of their employees. It becomes a matter of simply being aware.

Being aware of the routines of the community around you. Knowing what is normal in your neighborhood will help you spot what is out of place. Train yourself to see what is not supposed to be there; the door or gate that should be locked but is not, strange vehicles sitting by the road for no reason, unusual people or activity at sensitive places on the farm such as pesticide or fertilizer storage. Keep track of sensitive supplies such as antibiotics, fuels or fertilizers. Monitor the health and well being of animals, crops, employees, and family. The sudden death of animals or plants could point to problems beyond normal management parameters. Be prepared to take action if needed.

In an effort to strengthen the preparedness and responsiveness of Michigan's agricultural community, a tabletop or mock emergency event was conducted by the Michigan Department of Agriculture in East Lansing. Participating in this event were representatives from nearly all aspects of Michigan's dairy industry, including producers, milk haulers, elevator operators, state police, FBI, Department of Community Health, USDA, and Michigan State University. The tabletop exercise generated a great deal of interest from those who participated. One significant issue that caught everyone's

attention was the difficulty in getting information about the presence of sick animals and/or people from multiple farms identified as potential terrorist assault victims and reported as such. The upshot of this pointed to an increased willingness on the part of those on the farm to recognize and report emergencies.

Have local emergency numbers posted where everyone on the farm can easily access them. Invite your county emergency management coordinator or their representative to visit your farm so they will understand your issues and be better prepared to help, if the need arises. The county emergency management coordinator can often be located in the phone book under county government listings or through the sheriff's office. Take what you see and hear seriously and do not be afraid to report it. State and local authorities need your help to identify terrorist activities or head off emergency situations before they affect other farms or the general public. Emergency management / homeland security is a concern for agriculture on many levels. Expect to hear more about it in the future.

References

1. Chalk, P., "The US Agricultural sector; A New Target for Terrorism?", Janes Intelligence review, February 9, 2001. Accessed at http://www.janes.com/regional_news/americas/news/jir/jir010209_1_n.shtml
2. Toolkit For Managing The Emergency Consequences Of Terrorist Incidents: Appendix E: Agriterrorism, July 2002, Accessed at <http://www.fema.gov/preparedness/toolkit.shtml>