United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
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Statement by Secretary Veneman
Submitted for the Record to the Gilmore Commission
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Chairman Gilmore and distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to share the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) role in protecting our country from terrorism with the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction.

When the Gilmore Commission was established four years ago, few Americans foresaw the profound way that terrorism could affect us, and very few understood the potential impact of weapons of mass destruction. This Commission, however, has been on the forefront of both of these issues, which are now central not only to American foreign policy, but also to the work of every department within the Federal government. I commend the Commission for its role in heightening awareness of these issues, for bringing more accountability to the government and for its recommendations for improving homeland security.

In its latest report, the Commission considers the economic impact of a significant attack against American agriculture and finds that, "the downstream effect of a major act of terrorism against this highly valuable industry would likely be enormous."[1] Indeed, with one in eight American jobs directly involved in, or dependent upon agriculture, the economic impact of an attack on this sector could be the most important threat we face.

I want to commend the Commission, too, for observing that because agriculture was not recognized as a critical infrastructure when critical infrastructures were initially identified, agriculture did not benefit from the heightened awareness of terrorist threats that were paid to other sectors. As you further note, though, the Bush Administration has recognized this oversight, designated agriculture as a critical infrastructure in its *National Strategy,*[2] and has taken strong steps toward protecting it. Addressing the new threat requires extraordinary vision, new thinking and the ability to look at the much larger issue – the protection of our citizens against potential threats.

We have seen the devastation, destruction and loss of lives – to say nothing about the damage to our economy – caused by the events of that horrible day, September 11, 2001. It is something that nobody wants to see repeated. It is why all of us are considering the important issues of

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[1] RAND, *The Fourth Annual Report to the President and the Congress of the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction: Chapter VII, Implementing the National Strategy*, December 15, 2002, p. 68.
[2] The White House, Office of Homeland Security, *The National Strategy for Homeland Security,* July 16, 2002, p. 30.

homeland security and how we can best prepare for and prevent future attacks. However, preparedness also requires us to consider how we can best ready this nation – and the infrastructure which supports it – to respond in the event of another attack.

Background – Post September 11, 2001

Over the last two years, our mission at USDA has evolved and expanded to include homeland security. In the past, our focus was on preventing and deterring the unintentional introduction of pests and diseases into our country and ensuring a plentiful food supply that is safe from unintentional contamination.

Shortly after the events of September 11, USDA undertook a top-to-bottom review to see how best to grapple with potential terrorist threats. I immediately formed a Homeland Security Council to develop a Department-wide plan concerning homeland security. USDA's homeland security efforts are focused upon three key areas: agricultural production and the food supply, USDA facilities, and USDA staff and emergency preparedness. Forming the Homeland Security Council was the first step in a series of organizational changes aimed at improving the Department's ability to perform homeland security-related activities.

I also established a Homeland Security Staff to coordinate Department-wide activities. The mission of this staff is to provide overall leadership, to coordinate programs, and to plan for, and respond to, major natural and terrorist emergencies and threats. This staff coordinates policy formulation, response plans, and reporting and action assignments for the mission areas. The staff leads the activation of USDA's incident management system and its Federal Response Plan duties in the event of a major incident and oversees USDA's nationwide homeland security policies and procedures. The staff also coordinates the Department's homeland security activities with the White House's Homeland Security Council, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), other federal agencies, and public and private organizations; collaborates with many White House offices, USDA agencies, and other federal partners on the development and submission of a coordinated budget request for homeland security; and provides staff support to the Homeland Security Council. Many USDA agencies have also created offices or enhanced existing offices to serve a similar function within the agency and work in close coordination with the USDA Homeland Security Staff.

In addition, USDA has worked closely with the rest of the Administration and Congress during the creation of the new DHS. USDA will also continue to improve its prevention, surveillance, communications and response efforts.

Protecting Agricultural Production and the Food Supply

Agricultural Production

To ensure the security of our animals and plants, USDA has utilized its personnel, many of whom are stationed throughout the nation, as a first line of defense. We have worked with our Federal partners to ensure that strong laws and regulations are in place to deter terrorists. In addition to fortifying our first line of defense, we are enhancing the surveillance capabilities of the nation's plant and animal health laboratories. Lastly, USDA is working closely with its

partners at the Federal, State, and local levels, in the private sector, and consumers, to ensure that they are educated and are equipped to aid in the defense of our agricultural production.

Personnel
Since September 11, 2001, USDA has increased its safeguarding personnel, such as border inspectors, wild-land firefighters, and veterinarians – those on the front lines of homeland security. Congress recognized the importance of USDA's border inspection personnel to homeland security programs in the Department of Homeland Security Act of 2002, which created DHS. As mandated by the Act, approximately 2,600 members of the USDA border inspection force have been transferred to the new department. These individuals enhance prevention efforts to keep foreign agricultural pests and diseases from entering the United States. USDA will continue to work in close consultation with DHS to train these inspectors and set policy for plants, animals and commodities entering the nation.

In addition to the transferred personnel, USDA maintains National Forest Service enforcement personnel along the hundreds of miles of continuous Forest Service land on both our northern and southern borders. The Department has also added 18 new veterinarian positions to the agricultural quarantine inspection staff at borders, ports of entry, and on farms to ensure that strong preparedness programs are in place. Furthermore, USDA has added 20 new food import surveillance officers to ports of entry.

Regulations
One of the most important steps taken to secure American agricultural production and the food supply was the "Select Agents Rule" mandated by the Agriculture Bioterrorism Protection Act of 2002. USDA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued complementary regulations that established new safeguards for the possession, use, and transfer of certain toxins and biological agents. These safeguards reduce the chance of terrorists acquiring dangerous pathogens and toxins.

Laboratories
In its December 2002, report, the Commission urged the expansion of laboratory capacity, noting that in the event of a terrorist attack, our laboratories would likely be overwhelmed.[3] USDA concurs with this assessment, and is in the process of creating networks that will increase laboratory capacity.

In addition, USDA has begun a pilot version of a National Animal Health Laboratory Network (NAHLN), a network of Federal and State resources intended to enable a rapid and sufficient response to animal health emergencies, including foot and mouth disease and other foreign animal diseases. The NAHLN reconfigures the nation's animal health diagnostic services by positioning the National Veterinary Services Laboratories in Ames, Iowa, to be the lead animal health laboratory and allowing certain laboratories operated by States and universities to cooperate in foreign animal disease surveillance and related services. Such an arrangement will enhance the nation's animal health diagnostic services, speed response efforts should a foreign animal disease be detected in the United States, and lend greater credibility to our animal health export certifications. A similar effort is underway to build a laboratory network for plants.

[3] RAND at p. 74.

Communications

To ensure the protection of our nation's agriculture, USDA has worked with its partners at the State and local levels and the private sector to ensure they are informed of, and have the tools necessary to both prevent and respond to an attack. USDA-sponsored guidance documents, security upgrades and partnerships are essential to a robust communications system.

Guidance documents provide helpful information to industry, consumers, and State and local partners. The voluntary nature of the guidance has enabled USDA to share recommendations and information.. USDA has developed guidance documents for distribution to farmers and ranchers to remind them of steps they can take to secure their operations. Information was posted on the USDA website and distributed through the USDA Extension system to reach constituents in every county in the nation.

Strong security systems in the field enhance communication. They enable USDA headquarters and field offices to share information quickly, securely, and reliably. USDA has upgraded the security systems at its State and county offices. This upgrade included establishing a web-based tracking system for disaster reporting, maintaining databases of fertilizer, food, feed and seed listings, and coordinating with State and county emergency boards for assistance during an emergency.

Training and seminars are also key components of a communications strategy. For this reason, USDA has, and will continue to conduct, on-going Foreign Animal Disease Awareness Training seminars for Federal and State veterinarians. In addition, the Department has conducted, and continues to conduct, satellite seminars to share vital emergency preparedness information with Federal and State veterinary officials and emergency planners, military representatives, and academia. As part of this effort, USDA has developed a CD-ROM to help practitioners better identify and diagnose animal diseases and distributed it to State and Federal veterinarians, veterinary schools, and associations.

USDA has also partnered with States, universities and tribal lands to increase their homeland security prevention, detection and response efforts. USDA provided funding for those efforts and is currently developing rapid tests for agents that pose the most serious threats to our agricultural system. Some examples of these threats include foot and mouth disease and rinderpest.

While this is an overview of what we are doing to protect agricultural production, USDA is just as active in protecting the food supply.

Food Supply

As with agricultural production, USDA now must consider how to prevent, and respond to, intentional threats to the safety of the food supply. Historically, USDA has been responsible for ensuring the safety of meat, poultry, and egg products from unintentional contamination. Over the years, USDA has faced tampering and intentional contamination of the food supply, but on a small scale. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, now require us to seriously consider the possibility of a large-scale attack on the food supply.

As with agricultural production, USDA has relied upon our greatest asset, our field personnel, as we adjust to the new threats. In addition to personnel, the keys to protecting the food supply lie in a coordinated effort, a strong understanding of the threat and our vulnerabilities, an enhanced laboratory system, and communications between all sectors.

Personnel
USDA has approximately 7,600 personnel at federally inspected food establishments nationwide. These individuals are trained to look for signs that may suggest intentional contamination and adulteration of meat, poultry, and egg products. This workforce is comprised of consumer safety inspectors, consumer safety officers, compliance officers, and veterinarians.

Coordination
USDA has participated in several drills at the Federal and State levels to test and improve response procedures. These drills have proven valuable in identifying vulnerabilities and assisting with interagency coordination.

Vulnerabilities and Threats
To ensure that we are taking the right steps to protect the food supply, we first needed to understand its vulnerabilities and the threats posed by terrorists. In the months following the attacks, USDA conducted vulnerability assessments for domestic and imported food and conducted threat assessments to ensure the security of food. The assessments also addressed food purchased by USDA for Federal feeding programs, as well as shipping procedures and storage. Based on the assessments, USDA developed a food security plan and training sessions for employees in preparedness activities.

These assessments also played a vital role in developing a plan for USDA's role within Liberty Shield, the Administration-wide strategy for protecting the homeland from terrorist attacks during the war in Iraq. USDA's measures included increasing the number of agents tested for in the food supply and increasing the frequency of testing.

Enhanced Laboratories' Capabilities
Food regulatory laboratories are essential surveillance and response tools. One of the most important steps USDA has taken is to enhance security at its three food regulatory laboratories and increase their capacity to test for products, hazards and biological agents. This is consistent with the Commission's recommendation to improve laboratory capacity, addressed above.

Communications
USDA prepared and distributed food security guidance documents for the processing, distribution, and transport of meat, poultry and egg products. USDA has also developed information on biosecurity and the food supply for constituents and processors. To ensure that consumers have an opportunity to provide critical information, USDA implemented the national Consumer Complaint Monitoring System, a surveillance and sentinel system that monitors and tracks food-related consumer complaints.

Protecting USDA Laboratory Facilities

Addressing the concern that foreign terrorists might seek access to laboratory facilities and the pathogens stored there for research and testing, USDA issued two Departmental Manuals addressing policies and procedures for pathogen control, physical security, human reliability, cybersecurity, and incident response plans. Additionally, USDA developed departmental policies for the sponsorship of non-citizen scientists working in USDA facilities, including a tracking system for these workers. Furthermore, background checks are being conducted for non-citizen workers. In addition, all positions at USDA labs are being examined for personnel reliability and the appropriate background investigations are being conducted, beginning with the Bio Safety Level 3 (BSL-3) locations.

Protecting USDA Staff and Emergency Preparedness and Response

As our first line of defense, USDA employees play a vital role in protecting the nation's agricultural production and food supply. Therefore, employees that are knowledgeable and well trained in emergency preparedness and response are key to this effort. To ensure that our critical infrastructure is protected and employees are safe, USDA developed additional security procedures for use when the threat of terrorist attacks, as determined by the Homeland Security Advisory System, increases. This approach was integrated with Liberty Shield.

A coordinated workforce is also essential to carrying out prevention and response activities. Guidance for a coordinated, prepared workforce can be found in the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and National Response Plan (NRP).

USDA is now implementing a Department-wide NIMS based on the successful system currently utilized by USDA's Forest Service. The NIMS has systems for command and control, coordination, training and qualification, and publication management. This effort is consistent with Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5, which called for a single, comprehensive approach to domestic incident management.

USDA is working with DHS to draft the NRP and NIMS documents. Various aspects of agricultural production and food will be addressed in the new plan, including animal and plant health, food safety, nutrition, and wild-land firefighting. Since the NRP will integrate the Federal government's domestic prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery plans into a single all-discipline, all hazards plan, we believe it will address the Commission's concerns that agricultural production and food be adequately represented in current national response plans.

Next Steps

Our work to date is just the beginning. We have begun to develop the foundation for an agricultural production and food security program. While we carefully consider the next steps, we must continue our ongoing efforts because the agricultural production and food sectors are still vulnerable to attack. Therefore, USDA will continue to build upon its accomplishments thus far, as reflected in the recent budget request that calls for bolstering ongoing initiatives. These

initiatives fall into four categories: prevention and preparedness, surveillance, communications, and response.

Prevention and Preparedness

USDA is seeking new funding to expand laboratory networks, strengthen laboratory security measures, conduct research on emerging animal diseases, and develop new vaccines. The Department will continue to develop the NAHLN, as mentioned above, train more personnel, expand standardized rapid/sensitive testing capabilities, increase BSL-3 laboratory capacity, assure quality standards and proficiency testing, and improve communications for data sharing. USDA will also expand the plant laboratory network, by establishing national standard operating procedures for diagnostics, sampling, and reporting, by providing inter-regional communication, and by creating a national database for monitoring disease and pest outbreaks.

Surveillance

USDA employees in our nation's food processing facilities and on the farm are our first line of defense and have a unique ability to serve as a surveillance tool. Therefore, staffing these positions is essential to the Department's homeland security efforts. USDA has set a staffing level goal of 7,680 food inspectors, an increase of 80 inspectors, who are on the front line in our nation's food facilities looking for unintentional and intentional threats to food safety. In addition, USDA is examining ways to expand the role of its Extension Service and other on-site employees to include homeland security responsibilities.

USDA employees on the farm also serve as a surveillance tool. USDA has set goals to increase on the farm inspections, expand the availability of foot and mouth disease vaccines, provide protection against chronic wasting disease and poultry diseases, and expand diagnostic and other scientific and technical services.

Research is key to a strong surveillance program. USDA is researching remote sensing technology that would detect the introduction of foreign pests and plant and animal diseases and has requested funding for the National Research Initiative, a USDA grants program funding research on a peer-reviewed, competitive basis in the biological, environmental, physical, and social sciences relevant to agriculture, food, and the environment.

Communications

Two of our highest homeland security priorities at USDA are the improvement of communications channels between the Department and the intelligence community, and the creation of a more sophisticated way of communicating sensitive information to the private sector so that when there are incidents, warnings or threats, the private sector can assist us in preventing or mitigating a problem. USDA is working with DHS to coordinate our communications programs to better protect agricultural production and the food supply. One such joint effort is the DHS-USDA-HHS project to organize the food and agriculture sectors. An organized sector can provide assistance to the industry. For example, this sector could suggest guidelines and best practices, and provide a means for sharing information.

Response
As mentioned above, USDA is working with DHS to write and implement the NRP and NIMS documents. As part of this effort, USDA will implement NIMS throughout the entire Department, starting this year with online training and other forms of training and certification.

Conclusion

In conclusion, USDA has acted decisively and aggressively since September 11, 2001, to establish a national strategy to keep American agricultural production secure from intentional harm and to maintain a secure and reliable food supply. We have done this through a top-to-bottom review of our organization, thorough assessments of our vulnerabilities, simulating attack scenario exercises, increased surveillance, more targeted and expedited communications, and a more robust response strategy.

While I cannot tell you that we have mitigated all of the threats to American agriculture, I can state that we are much better off today than we were two years ago and that we are aggressively pursuing new programs and policies to better protect agricultural production and the food supply.

Finally, I want to thank the Commission for its work, which has brought attention to the threats that terrorism presents and a specific focus to the threat posed to agriculture and food.