

(06490)

2 June 2006

Ms Vicki Buchbach
Committee Manager
Public Accounts Committee
Parliament House
Macquarie St
SYDNEY NSW 2000

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Dear Ms Buchbach

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into managing animal and plant diseases

State Council of the Rural Lands Protection Boards would like to make a submission to the Inquiry addressing the term of reference relating to "The effectiveness and efficiency of the management of endemic diseases, including the roles of government and industry". A brief submission is also made in relation to the Inquiry's second term of reference, "The State's preparedness to manage animal disease emergencies".

Rural Lands Protection Boards are in a unique situation in relation to endemic disease control as they have responsibilities to both government and industry. State Council is of the view that defining the roles and responsibilities of Industry and Government in the development and implementation of endemic disease control programs will result in programs that are able to deliver their objective.

Yours sincerely

Steve Orr
Chief Executive Officer

Rural Lands Protection Board State Council submission to the Inquiry into managing animal and plant diseases

This submission is provided in response to the Inquiry's third term of reference "The effectiveness and efficiency of the management of endemic diseases, including the roles of government and industry".

Background:

Within NSW the public animal health service is provided through a partnership between Rural Lands Protection Boards (RLPBs) and the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI). The objectives of the public animal health service in NSW are that:

- NSW livestock and livestock products are safe with respect to residues, contaminants, and disease agents.
- Continuous, competitive access to markets is not limited by animal health status.
- Animal diseases have minimal impact on trade, production, animal welfare and human health.
- Emergency animal disease and residue incidents are responded to in a cost effective manner with least possible disruption to trade and/or impact on public health.

Rural Lands Protection Boards deliver the "front-line" animal health service on behalf of the community. The animal health service provided by Boards is funded by livestock producers and in this respect the service is "industry funded". In other states and territories, the equivalent service is funded by government. The service is made up of core animal health programs and local programs.

The core animal health programs are directed towards disease or residue issues of state or national significance. These programs are undertaken in accordance with policies and procedures agreed between RLPBs and DPI. This agreement is reached in accordance with the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding (pursuant to S 13. of the RLP Act) between State Council and the Director-General of the DPI (the MOU).

All boards are required to address these programs albeit that the level of activity may vary between individual Boards depending on the type of livestock production in the district and the relevance of the particular issue to that district. The core animal health programs require Board staff to act in their capacity as statutory officers. For these programs, Boards are acting as agents of the Government.

Local programs on the other hand involve activities that are directed towards improving the productivity of the local livestock industries. Many of these activities are initiatives of individual Boards and some involve coordination between districts and technical support from the DPI, but they do not involve Board staff using their statutory authority. In relation to these programs Boards act on behalf of industry (at the local level) by responding to their needs.

The effectiveness and sustainability of the Boards' animal health service is dependent upon there being an appropriate balance between the two types of program. The undertaking of local programs that producers see as being of direct benefit is vital to obtaining their active participation in the core programs. Boards prepare an Animal Health Plan each year which identifies the activities proposed and resources allocated to these two types of program.

Discussion:

Endemic diseases that warrant being subject to control or management programs fall into two categories. Firstly, those diseases of state or national significance for reasons of market access, livestock productivity or human health (examples include Johne's disease, footrot and anthrax respectively) are addressed as core programs. Secondly, the less important endemic diseases (such

as internal parasites) which Boards assess as having a significant impact on productivity in their district which are addressed through local programs.

The Inquiry represents an opportunity for clarification of the relationship between Boards, Industry and Government in relation to their respective roles and responsibilities in endemic disease control programs. It is important to acknowledge that Industry interests may be different at the national, state, regional and district level. Depending on the issue, individual RLPBs may have an industry (at the district level) and/or a government role. Given the close ties between Boards and industry at the district level (as a result of both representation and the source of funding) it is important that the producers they are serving understand when the Board is providing the service as an agent of government.

The overriding concern of State Council is that Boards are able to meet government and industry expectations of their ability to deliver core animal health programs. There are recent examples of animal health programs that have had unachievable aims and/or inappropriate strategies or mix of strategies and/or are under-resourced. State Council is reluctant to commit Boards to the delivery of such programs.

Recommendation:

Recognising that under the MOU State Council and DPI must agree on the animal health programs to be implemented by Boards, State Council believes that when animal health programs involving Boards, Industry and Government are being developed, the following principles should be followed:

- A Board has responsibility for delivery of core animal health (AH) programs and local AH programs to their district.
- In delivering the core AH programs, Boards are acting as agents of the government.
- In delivering local AH programs, Boards are acting in a “local industry” capacity.
- Provision of an effective AH service to the district is dependent upon a Board being able to undertake activities for both industry (at the district level) and the government.
- Boards believe the government should have reasonable expectations of the amount of time Boards spend undertaking core AH programs so that Boards are able to meet the need for local AH programs.
- Boards provide the resources for delivery of local AH programs.
- Boards decide on the objectives and strategies for local AH programs.
- Other industry organisations are able to have input into the setting of priorities for local programs.
- Boards expect industry (at the state or national level as appropriate) in conjunction with government to decide on the objectives for the core AH programs and to be advocates for these objectives.
- Boards provide a base-level operational resource (staff and on-costs) for the provision of core AH programs.
- From time to time, core AH programs require resources additional to those provided by Boards to achieve their objective. Boards expect industry (at the appropriate level) and/or government to be responsible for advocating for and providing these additional resources.

- - State Council can undertake appropriate consultation to provide a “state industry” perspective on behalf of RLPBs.
- Boards are advocates for core AH programs that are “deliverable”. This means that the strategies are appropriate and sufficient resources are available to achieve the objectives of the program. There must also be reasonable pathways for all individuals that are adversely affected by any regulations and the clear majority of stakeholders across all Boards must support the program.
- Boards accept that industry must have input into the strategies of core AH programs but do not accept that industry can insist on programs with inappropriate strategies (or an inappropriate combination of strategies) that prevent Boards from delivering the desired outcomes.
- Boards accept that DPI has the ultimate responsibility for the overall content of core AH programs but Boards are reluctant to accept responsibility for implementing these programs if they believe they cannot be delivered or achieved, unless directed to do so by the Minister.
- Boards expect industry to publicly support and explain the reasons for the regulatory aspects of core programs.
- Boards also expect the government to ensure industry meets their obligations.

The following submission is made in relation to the Inquiry's second term of reference, "The State's preparedness to manage animal disease emergencies". State Council would like to comment on the disease surveillance recommendation in the Performance Audit Report:

Disease surveillance is a core function of the RLPB animal health service. As such activities are undertaken in accordance with policies jointly agreed between NSW DPI and RLPBs. DPI provides funds to cover the cost of laboratory testing to diagnose / exclude any suspect exotic disease and for testing to establish an alternate diagnosis. Investigations to exclude emergency diseases may or may not involve the submission of samples to a laboratory. RLPBs have developed a reporting system to capture surveillance information on emergency diseases that are excluded on clinical grounds.

This arrangement works well for livestock species that are "stock" under the Rural Lands Protection Act. However, there are a number of emergency diseases that are declared in animal species that are not defined as "stock" under the RLP Act. The species of particular concern are poultry and ducks, but emergency diseases such as rabies affect dogs which are not stock either. It can be argued that the Boards' animal health function does not apply to species that are not stock under the RLP Act. However, as the providers of the State's front-line public animal health service, RLPBs would expect to be involved in the investigation of a possible emergency disease in these species. Indeed, the Stock Diseases Act identifies District Veterinarians and Rangers as positions to which these diseases can be notified. As noted above, formal agreement to undertake this type of activity requires a joint policy between DPI and RLPBs.

In relation to the initiatives to recruit and develop more veterinarians for livestock work in NSW, State Council would like the Inquiry to note that of the 102 students that participated in Sydney University's Rural Public Practice rotation, 87 were placed with RLPBs. Under this rotation, final year veterinary students spend four weeks in an agency providing government veterinary services. Thirty eight RLPBs employ a full time district veterinarian. A further four Boards employ additional veterinarians either in a full or part time capacity.