

FOOT-AND-MOUTH DISEASE, PREVENTION

34. Hon M.J. CRIDDLE to the Minister for Agriculture

I had some conversation with the minister about this question.

With 12 countries now experiencing outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease and the obvious danger to our livestock industry, what prevention and surveillance measures has Agriculture Western Australia in place, particularly in relation to boats coming into Western Australia from the north and other visitors?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

I thank the member for some notice of this question.

I note the question relates entirely to Agriculture Western Australia. To make sense of the answer I need to expand the question to include the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and its Western Australian contractor, the Western Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. Following the last meeting of the Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand in February, this matter was dealt with in some detail as a major agenda item of the ministerial conference. Decisions were made at that meeting on a commonwealth-state basis because they relate to the effect of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service facilities and the way higher standards will be implemented in Australia. The principal outcome of the agreement reached is that, as far as I can determine, every possible entry point that is subject to any level of AQIS security will now have full 24-hour security. That means every external airport, port and container terminal in Australia will now have full 24-hour surveillance; that is at a cost of several millions of dollars and is a major commitment.

The other decisions made by ARMCANZ, and agreed to by Agriculture Western Australia and me as the minister, involve issues perhaps slightly outside of FMD but relate to animal feeding standards and Australia's credibility as a supplier of clean food, which is related more to bovine spongiform encephalopathy issues than to FMD. It is worth noting, however, that Australia has agreed to an extremely stringent regime of restrictions on what may be added to animal feed, and they currently meet European standards. We have offered to go even further should Europe demand an increase in those standards.

A component of the member's question deals with northern Australia, and it is very wise that it does. I raised that issue specifically because I believed the matter had not been adequately addressed at the ARMCANZ meeting. I raised, with the support of the Northern Territory Minister for Primary Industry and Fisheries, the question of northern incursions. I did so, being aware of a number of statements made which in the past have been offensive about our current arrangements in northern Australia.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I do not want to cut off the minister but he should begin to conclude his answer.

Hon KIM CHANCE: It is an important component.

The PRESIDENT: That is why I said I do not want to cut off the minister; however, a number of members want to ask questions. That is in the minister's hands anyway and a generous Leader of the House would obviously take note of that.

Hon KIM CHANCE: I am the very soul of generosity, Mr President! I will be as fast as I can.

I have been concerned for some time that the risk involved in incursions into the north has been underestimated. I understand and accept the biological advice that an incursion of FMD from the north is less likely than one through a southern airport. However, I am particularly concerned about the prospects as a result of the somewhat unlikely event of foot-and-mouth disease coming in through the north. There is a high likelihood that it could become firmly established simply because if the disease got into the feral pig population, for example, it could be undiscovered for some years. If that were to occur, we would not only have a problem but also would have endemic FMD, and that would be a major problem for Australia, far more so than if an outbreak were to occur - God forbid - in a southern airport, for example, where we could quickly lock down that part of the State and control it. If there were an outbreak in the feral pig population in the north, it could be two to three years before we even knew of the first case.