

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

Cooperative Extension Service
College of Agriculture
Communications and Technology
P.O. Box 3354 • Laramie, WY 82071-3354
(307) 766-2540 • fax (307) 766-3998 • www.uwyo.edu

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Contact: Vicki Hamende, Senior Editor and Writer
Phone: (307) 766-6342
E-mail: hamende@uwyo.edu

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STATE SEEKS TO COORDINATE FIGHT AGAINST POTENTIAL AGRO- TERRORISM

The U.S. agricultural industry is a “soft target” vulnerable to bioterrorism, according to national experts at a “Keeping Wyoming Safe and Secure” conference Wednesday in Casper.

The good news for the state is that the University of Wyoming and collaborating agencies are working proactively to protect livestock and crops through prevention, early detection, rapid intervention and the development of a far-reaching system for emergency preparedness.

“The best resources we have are those that already exist in the state,” said Professor Donal O’Toole, head of the Wyoming State Veterinary Laboratory and the UW Department of Veterinary Sciences. “What they need is to be better integrated.”

How to accomplish a coordination of efforts in the possible face of deliberate as well as unintentional introductions of infectious agents to farms, ranches and wildlife areas was discussed at the day-long informative event sponsored by the UW Cooperative Extension Service, the Wyoming Department of Health, the Wyoming Department of Agriculture and the Wyoming Stock Growers and Wool Growers associations.

Attendees represented the fields of agriculture, government, health, food processing, business, wildlife, forestry, land management, natural resources, chemical supply and law enforcement.

Speakers noted that the rapid spread of livestock diseases as evidenced during outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease in other countries and the difficulty in immediately recognizing slowly developing plant pathogens point to the need for a “first-detector network” starting with local producers and extending to homeland security officials.

State Veterinarian Jim Logan said the threat of a biological attack against agriculture is not new. “It is considered to be one of the top five dangers to the United States,” he explained. Such an attack, he said, is relatively inexpensive to perpetrate and is less risky than biologic assaults on human populations.

“In addition, biologic agents are readily obtained and more than a dozen countries are suspected of maintaining ongoing offensive biologic weapons research programs,” he added.

UW Professor Gary Franc, an extension plant pathologist, discussed the importance of the state’s participation in a new National Plant Diagnostic Network designed to speed the detection of dangerous plant diseases and pests. “We need to use

our infrastructure to protect American croplands,” he said. “By linking everybody we can strengthen our diagnostic and response capabilities.”

O’Toole said that in an emergency, Wyoming resources are the key. “We have trained personnel and agencies who know each other’s culture. We have a response plan that works for Wyoming,” he explained. Past international outbreaks, he added, have pointed out the need for adequate laboratories, animal identification and movement controls, improved communication and better carcass disposal options.

Also representing UW at the conference were Professor Lee Belden of the Department of Veterinary Sciences, who spoke about the causes, distribution and control of disease in populations, and Marge Rayda, a research associate in the Department of Renewable Resources and state coordinator for the Cooperative Agricultural Pest Survey program.

Marc Mattix, a pathologist with the Montana Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory and, like O’Toole, a U.S. Department of Agriculture-trained foreign animal disease diagnostician, noted that agriculture generates 13.1 percent of the gross national product and represents 17 percent of the work force. “Agriculture affects every other industry,” he said. “Agro-terrorism causes economic devastation, social upheaval and political instability.”

Other speakers at the conference included representatives of the state and federal Office of Homeland Security, the Law Enforcement Academy Research Network, USDA, the Wyoming Department of Health and the Wyoming Livestock Board.

Logan urged entities involved to “communicate, educate, be proactive, don’t over react and don’t under react” to prepare for possible agro-terrorism.