Panel Discussion Three: Addressing Animal Welfare in Emergency Response Planning

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Panel Discussion Three: 
Addressing Animal Welfare in Emergency Response Planning

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Note:

This is the third session (edited transcript) of three panel discussions held at the University of Guelph, April 29–May 1, 2007. Panelists included Mohan Raj, Department of Clinical Veterinary Science, University of Bristol, United Kingdom; Maggie Mort, Institute for Health Research, Lancaster University, United Kingdom; Brian Evans, Chief Veterinary Officer, Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada; Carin Wittnich, Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, Ontario, Canada; and Randall Covey, Director of Disaster Services, The Humane Society of the United States, Washington, DC.

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Question: Dr. Raj, early on in your talk you were discussing very briefly the option of shutting fans down. I just want to bring forward the presumption you were working on about the lung capacity of an infected bird. Low pathogenic AI [avian influenza] is a respiratory disease in poultry but high pathogenic AI involves multiorgan failure, so it’s not necessarily restricted to the lungs. Those birds who are dying from the disease will probably have reduced lung capacity but, when you think about a barn full of birds, there are going to be a whole bunch in there who still have functional lungs. So shutting fans down will have a negative impact on those birds who are not quite sick. On the other hand, I’d also say that shutting the fans down really isn’t about respiratory ventilation. It’s really a temperature issue. A barn that has had a ventilation shutdown will go down really fast, in fact probably much faster than one that has had to go through the process of being sealed up and subjected to CO₂. I think it’s horrendous, but we certainly hear of some farmers thinking that they should just shut their fans down and kill the birds through hyperthermia.

My other comment is for Dr. Evans. I understand where you are in the pyramid of things in the veterinary world, kind of at the apex, and I know you’re probably very busy, but I’m personally disappointed that you couldn’t attend the presentation I [Bowes] gave earlier in the day. I was talking about what some of the long-term social and emotional impacts have been surrounding our high pathogenic AI outbreak. Since the outbreak I have been trying to get that message, of the impact and importance of AI, to the people in positions of decision making. It has been very frustrating and a huge challenge. I don’t seem to be able to get that message to the people who, in the future, will be making decisions during the next event of a foreign animal disease. So I wish you could have been there. I’m disappointed that we don’t have half this room filled with people from the CFIA [Canadian Food Inspection Agency]. At this conference, we have spoken about the mass euthanasia of birds and about disease control. The CFIA is the lead agency to handle these things and I just don’t see them here.

Evans: You’re right that the reality for all of us is that there are only x number of hours in the day. But this is an important issue and I think we have five CFIA people here. Maybe they’re not visible to you because they don’t interface with you on a regular basis, but we did support five people here. And in government circles, to get five people to a single conference is quite an achievement these days in terms of government accountability and value for money. At the same time, while we have five people here, I also have three people at a similar conference going on right now in Egypt on animal welfare. And I have two people who are in South America doing a study on animal welfare practices in response to disease activities there. We have another individual working on communications with the general public on animal welfare issues. They are all working on those things today as
we’re all here. So I wouldn’t read that as a lack of commitment or a lack of importance that we’ve placed on this issue.

I don’t think anybody should walk out of here saying that the CFIA is responsible for animal welfare in Canada. If they believe that, they’re at the wrong place. We are one of a number of organizations that can play a role in animal caring and yes, we do have opportunities at the national level to interface that some others might not have. My role is one of facilitating, motivating, and integrating activities among a community of competencies of people who can make a difference. If you’re dependent on one organization to manage this for you, you will always be disappointed. I hope people came here today with the understanding that they are a part of the solution, as we hope to be at the CFIA.

And the messages that you are putting forward are not lost messages. All the presentations will be captured and recommendations will be brought forward and they will ultimately have an impact. Otherwise we wouldn’t have invested in our staff’s time to be here and we wouldn’t have sponsored the organization of this conference. Don’t judge us by the numbers. There is a saying about not always measuring people by what they accomplish but to look at what’s in their heart and what they’re trying to do. And you’re trying to do that and so are we.

Question: I do appreciate the huge volume of work that has been done by the CFIA. I am encouraged by it and yet I still have some concerns. This morning we heard about post-traumatic stress disorder and about the impacts on first line workers and how they’re able to feed into the review process and to make things change. What disturbed me was that you talked about CFIA people who had gone over to the FMD [Foot and Mouth Disease] outbreak, but I haven’t heard anything about all of the people who were involved and impacted in the response to our Canadian animal health emergency—AI. Nobody is asking the questions that Dr. Mort has asked. There is so much more that still can be learned apart from trying to figure out all the science. There are now long-term impacts on people. I bet you’re not going to get as many volunteers to respond to an outbreak from an experienced group as compared with a more naive group. I think we need to take care of our responders a little better. Canadians going over to the FMD outbreak brought the post-traumatic stress issue a little closer to home. We need to do the social work because we have a whole bunch of experiences out there.

Evans: Your comments are very legitimate. Perhaps a lot of people don’t realize that, having gone through some of the events we have gone through in Canada, AI, BSE [bovine spongiform encephalopathy], and others, that we are working with the Public Health Agency of Canada. They are currently tracking changes in communities with reference to issues such as family breakdown. They are looking at social service programs and how they’ve been impacted.
They are looking at the number of increased prescriptions being given out for Zoloft and other prescription drugs given out to deal with issues. They are looking at issues such as alcoholism and spousal abuse that can result when people are put in stressful situations. We are working with the Public Health Agency to try and capture all that. Again, it requires us to go deep into the organization—it’s not the CFIA’s mandate per se.

We’re working with the University of Ottawa, studying the impacts of these types of events on individuals, on communities, and on society. When people have to make hard decisions to take their children out of university on the basis that they need them on the farm to help deal with an economic disaster, what’s that losing us in terms of a knowledge economy and a future for those individuals? People who leave their industry profession because they don’t see a future in it. That is being looked at and it is being analyzed, and hopefully it will be part of the parcel of information that we’ll take to political levels and to decision makers. So we can say that we cannot ignore these things. I don’t want to make up an acronym on the fly, but I think the word “human” relates to hurt, understanding, mitigation, and neutralization. That has to be a component of how we plan and of the support programs not just for the responders but, as Dr. Mort talked about, for the entire community well beyond agriculture. It gets back to citizenship engagement and having those discussions with society. We’re increasingly an urbanized society. People live in cities and are somewhat remote and away from the kind of realities that affect communities during these types of events. We can’t ignore that. We have to make it visible, look at it, and make use of it as a way of influencing the investments that will come to support it.

Question: In Manitoba, we have had a particularly busy year dealing with cases of animal neglect and cruelty, and I’ve learned that emotional and mental stress is much more exhausting than anything physical I’ve ever done. I’ve also realized that within our province we do not have a good support network for dealing with the emotional and mental strain that comes from dealing with disasters and, on a smaller scale, with cases of neglect and cruelty. We are lacking support networks not only for those on the front lines but also for the owners of the animals who we are responding to. I’m wondering if the people on the panel have any measures in place with the organizations that they deal with to help the people on the front lines but also to help the people who own those animals.

Covey: Counselors who have worked with us in situations like that have unanimously told us that having a plan in place, having a chain of command with clear direction and explaining to responders up front what it is that you’re trying to accomplish, can really help to mitigate the aftereffects. You should go in there with a positive goal, a clear plan, and give people clear assignments that they can follow. Explain to them that, although the situation they are going into is terrible, they are
going in to address it. Putting that sort of a positive spin on it can be really helpful in avoiding the aftereffects.

Wittnich: I’ve become involved with the human side of things quite a bit and I can tell you that the emotional well-being of responders is an aspect that is taken into consideration as part of the overall emergency planning. It is part of all the planning, team arrangements, deployment, and all the sorts of interactions that go on. As we go ahead in Canada and look at putting together the animal component, I think it’s integral that we take advantage of that. When I went down to Katrina, HSUS [The Humane Society of the United States] stationing was together with all the human deployment. The firefighters, and I can’t remember who else was there but there was a whole mess of people, had counselors and first aid medics there and responder well-being was taken into account and was very important.

I agree that one of the positive aspects for owners, the volunteers, and the people working on the front lines is communication. Every morning we got together at 6:30 or 7:00 with all the volunteers and veterinarians and administrators—everybody handling everything—and we had our planning sessions so that everybody would know what they were doing. And that also addresses the issue of the incident command system. Everybody, from whoever was taking the dogs out for a walk right on up to the top, knew what we were going to do that day. We had a purpose, we had a goal, and we achieved that goal and there was an understanding that took away some of the stress. As part of the civil side of things, that’s a very important component we need to consider.

Evans: It is an important issue and unfortunately I don’t think Deborah Whale [Chair of the Poultry Industry Council] is still with us. Deborah was here last night and she could talk from an industry sector perspective about some of the things they’ve attempted to do to provide counseling to affected owners of animals in certain circumstances. I won’t try to duplicate her knowledge in that area, but certainly when we have operational circumstances within national or even regional emergency response centers, part of the deployment consists of people who are there from an occupational health and safety standpoint, dealing with personal protection issues and with things like water quality. But there are also people there who are trained to watch people. I know Dr. James Young has spoken about this many times given all the emergencies he’s been involved with. You need people there who are trained to watch people and to recognize when those people start to decompensate. Dr. Young speaks about how some people will make themselves very busy and look like they’re doing a lot of activities. But, in fact, they’ve lost their ability to be productive and they’re sort of in denial about what’s really going on around them. They take on this hyper energy level and appear to be trying to do everything but they’re not really doing what their role is. Within your incident command structure you should have people who are there, not to manage the emergency sub-components, but to watch the people involved and to identify very early on if a person needs to be rotated
out or needs some counseling or down time. The natural tendency of most people is to get so passionate and committed that you can’t ask them to leave. You almost have to escort them away for a period of time and then help them deal with what it is they need. As Dr. Mort described, they’re actually acting normally because they’re responding to very abnormal circumstances.

Within the CFIA we have an Employee Assistance Program with professional counselors to deal with emotional, personal, financial, and other stress issues. And that needs to be a part of your planning process. Those people need to be available. They need to be close by so that they can step in immediately to deal with those types of traumas. As we said earlier, those traumas are not resolved in the short term. A large part of recovery happens over an extended period of time. So I can’t really speak to what industry is doing in terms of counseling with affected producers, but certainly it is a recognized need within the incident command system to have those structures in place.

Mort: I thought that the question you asked was expressed beautifully, because you talked about support networks for frontline workers and farmers or producers, and you didn’t talk about counseling and mental health services and those sorts of things. I think that it’s true to say that one of the most stressful things for frontline workers has been thinking that their knowledge and their expertise is not understood, and it links directly with what Dr. Bowes was saying. They don’t need counseling. What they need is to be able to get their story told and to have their expertise collated, to have some sort of public recognition of what they’ve been through and to have that documented. Because the other really stressful thing for people who’ve either had their stock culled, or for people who are doing the culling, is that there isn’t a better plan for the future, that the expertise and knowledge has not fed through to the planning process. It’s that fracture between experience on the ground and the kind of distant bureaucratic understanding of disasters that creates stress in itself and creates trauma and ends up retraumatizing people. Some people might need counseling; people who have recurrent mental health problems as a result of being stressed might need that, but for the majority it’s about that feeling of support and recognition of their expertise.

Question: Dr. Raj, I was very disappointed that you didn’t try nitrogen as a gas in your closed system. We know that CO₂ is not the ideal gas and that nitrogen might be—at least it’s completely safe. The reason you gave was that it would be at the same density as the air in the chamber. But that’s not true. There would be a big temperature differential between the gas that you would be introducing and the air that would be in the chamber. So, in fact, the cold nitrogen that you would introduce would be much denser and I think that it would replace the air in a satisfactory way. So I would encourage you to try nitrogen.
Raj: We didn’t have the opportunity to try nitrogen for two reasons. First, the system was urgently needed for field trials and second, the project was not a continuous development—it was a one-off in order to move away from the dustbins that the state veterinary service was using. You’re right; I think nitrogen would work if the temperature of the infused nitrogen gas was right. If the temperature was right it should displace. But one concern that I had at that time was whether we would be able to achieve the less than 2% oxygen necessary to kill chickens. When we talk about the gas mixture combinations of argon and CO\textsubscript{2}, you require a minimum of 5% residual oxygen. That’s easy to achieve. But to reduce from 5% residual oxygen to 2% or less than 2% takes quite a large volume of gas. That means that although you probably would be able to achieve less than 2%, you would need one cylinder for each cycle, which means one module, one cylinder—and your requirement will expand. And the problem the gas companies offered to us was that for every gas cylinder in use, one is on the road, one is being sterilized, and one is being filled. So you’re talking about four cylinders for every cylinder in use or something. We were extremely concerned when we asked them about the number of gas cylinders available in the country. They weren’t in thousands, which worried us. So those are the practical and logistic reasons we did not try nitrogen, but we will try in the future if we get the opportunity.

Question: One of the reasons I have attended this conference is that there isn’t enough information out there for domesticated pets and livestock when it comes to planning for emergencies. I certainly commend everybody here; it’s been a very interesting conference. Thank you very much for getting the CVR [Canadian Veterinary Reserve] up and running. I’m a member of the Ontario Association of Emergency Managers. Emergency Management Ontario has been on board as far as getting municipalities prepared. We want all of our residents to try to become disaster resilient for about 72 hours. In the last couple of years since this program has been up and running, we have started to expand into a lot of areas, including domestic pets and livestock. Most of the reception centers in Ontario will not accept pets. It is written into our plan, as part of our public education component, to tell people to keep their pets at home unless they are evacuating to a family member or to somewhere where it is safe to take pets. Currently, within most municipalities in Ontario, if you had to evacuate, your pets would be refused or you would be refused entry. I feel bad about having that as part of our public education, especially after seeing the photo of the animal who was left for almost 2 weeks. I have a dog. I know I would not leave my dog behind. I wouldn’t go to a shelter; I would go somewhere else where I knew my pet was going to be safe. So what should we be telling the public? I guess I’m thinking of the public’s interest, but I’m also thinking of the relationship between the person who is evacuating and the pet who may
have been left at home due to something I said during my public education programs.

Covey: In the United States, we actually used to give that same message, that if you evacuate leave your pet behind with 3 days worth of food and water. What we found though was that it just didn’t work. The message needs to be that when you evacuate, take your pets with you and have a plan in place in advance to know where you’re going to go. Make sure people know they can’t bring their pets to the human evacuation shelters, but your message should be to get the animals out. If it’s not safe for you then it’s not safe for your pets. Focus on putting the responsibility where it really belongs, which is on the animal owner, to have a plan in place. If that’s your message, people will start to get the idea that they can’t depend on the human shelters to deal with their animal issues. They will start to realize that they need to have a plan in place about where they are going to go.

Question: I work with a fire department and we have a professional service called a Critical Incident Stress Management [CISM] team within our county. I don’t know if every county within the province has this kind of a team, but I do know that there are quite a few. We deal strictly with first responders after an incident, responders like firefighters, police officers, and the emergency medical services. We have quick debriefings and we do follow-ups with the people. That might be something that veterinarian first responders might want to take advantage of and they are available at no cost.

Wittnich: That message about leaving your pets behind is going to change. We are not going to sit still in Canada and be 10 years behind. The fact that people are being told today to leave their pets at home, in spite of everything we have experienced, is unacceptable. We are going to change that. How we’re going to change that will be through a multipronged, they’ll-never-know-what-hit-them approach that will deal with government. We’re going to get on board with these disaster management groups. We’re going to get our humane societies, our sheltering people, and our SPCAs [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] on board. We’re going to provide shelters for animals just beside the people shelters, or maybe down the road from the people shelters, if we have to build the things ourselves. This is not going to continue here because it’s a disaster waiting to happen. Unfortunately right now we do have this scenario, but things are going to change. Trust me and wait for it.

Question: I was hoping to be able to come to this conference and find that one organization that was going to be able to solve all of our problems. What’s become very apparent over the last day and a half is that it is very much going to be a group effort. I think a big step in the right direction has been getting people here today. I
think it’s important to recognize that we all have different roles. Municipal government is the closest government structure to the community, and communities expect that their animals are going to be protected. I’m a small little piece in a municipal organization but certainly my commitment and my role is to make sure that happens. Obviously there are all these other obstacles that we’re faced with. Dr. Wittnich, you mentioned that your group has come together and, although you’re not pretending that your group is the one that’s responsible, we do need to get people together who can coordinate other groups. Someone has to take the lead on that.

What I’m going to take back to my municipality is that there are a lot of players who need to come to the table, a lot of stakeholders who need to be involved, and that someone needs to take the lead to be able to bring those parties together and develop a plan so that we’re not re-creating the wheel. I hope that I’ll be able to do an outreach with my fellow municipal colleagues so that we’re not struggling all at the same time. Our plans will be unique to our different community needs but at the same time, at the end of the day, we want to protect pets and we want to protect livestock. It’s animal welfare and that means the same thing regardless of where you are from.

Wittnich: I think that’s the whole concept of what we’re trying to do on the civil side of the CVR. We want to have a lead group to bring this together at a national level with the cooperation of organizations like the Canadian humane societies and the SPCAs. In some municipalities we’re expecting a miracle from these groups because they don’t have the resources. They don’t have the capacity. But when we look at things from a national perspective, we’ll be able to bring people in when that capacity is exceeded—and that could be two dogs and a budgie. In some situations you will have to get the outside help. So just a little bit of patience, it’s coming.

Question: Dr. Whiting has referred to lessons that have been demonstrated or given to us that we haven’t necessarily learned. I’ve been an animal welfare worker for 30 years and it is very frustrating. I am really encouraged, though, by the fact that we have the CVR, which I think is a tremendous first step. The message from municipal governments in Ontario about refusing to allow animals into shelters I can understand and appreciate, but it is quite concerning because that’s the same message that we heard out of Three Mile Island and the Mississauga Train Derailment and out of the fires in British Columbia. I’m glad to hear that the CVR might take the first step toward changing that message.

In BC, we encourage all of our SPCA branch managers, and we have 37 branches, to get involved in local planning with the local governments. We don’t have a tremendous amount of resources but we do encourage our local societies to get active at the municipal level and also with the provincial emergency program.
They can advise the governments about the resources that we have available to our communities. We will attend natural and man-made disasters and set up animal receiving stations. We will move animals to local exhibition grounds, fairgrounds, animal shelters, or veterinary hospitals. I would suggest that local communities get more involved with the animal welfare organizations that are available in their communities. Ontario is a large province with a lot of communities, and the Ontario SPCA has been around for a long time. The networking should start because that’s the only way you’re going to get things going here in Ontario.

Covey: I’m going to steal a quote from one of my colleagues in the United States with regard to disaster management. He said that it’s not always lessons learned; quite often it’s lessons documented. Whether you actually learn them or not is borne out in how you respond to future disasters.

Question: I would like to take a look at the broad context again. In order to deal with a problem you have to define a problem and to some extent draw a boundary around the problem. I just want to remind you that boundaries are not rigid and that the sorts of things we’re talking about here have other implications. For example, it’s now well recognized that refuges for battered women that do not make provisions for animals may restrict the number of women who come to them because women will refuse to leave their home, where they are subjected to abuse, if they have to leave an animal behind. So there could be cooperation between refuges for battered women and local animal shelters to address that problem. And I would also like to remind you about the huge problem of disasters and diseases in developing countries. I’m extremely encouraged by what we’ve heard about Canada’s attitude toward that and its willingness to contribute to those problems around the world.

Question: The question is for Dr. Evans. With regard to border issues, we’re in the process of starting emergency management plans in the agriculture industry. I was very encouraged to hear the municipal governments talk about being on board because we on the agricultural side have been trying to get through to the municipal governments. You talked about the World Organization for Animal Health and about the different understandings of zoning and compartmentalizing. Our zone is West Hawk Lake. Can you give a quick update on where we stand? This is intricate to our plans because I can have every emergency plan down to a T, but if the international trade organizations do not recognize our zone, then we are shut down and exports are stopped. Could you give an update on that and on whether or not that zoning will be recognized by the world organizations so that exports can continue?

Evans: I’ll give the short answer and would be glad to talk to you after. West Hawk, in terms of its ability to monitor animal movement, is a very central part of
getting other countries to recognize our ability to regionalize. I don’t think it should be assumed that if you have a disease on Vancouver Island that everything east of the Ontario-Manitoba border should be okay for trade and everything west of that shouldn’t be eligible for trade. I think part of this is a very pragmatic approach to ensure that what we capture at West Hawk feeds into our ability to model animal movement on a day-to-day basis so that we know exactly what the patterns of movements are. There has been a lot of work done out of AVC [Atlantic Veterinary College] on the demographics of swine movement in Canada. So we know when a disease does hit that we can better model or forecast where the disease was found and whether it moved from here to somewhere else in the last 24, 48, or 72 hours. Or if that’s not the origin of the disease, then that’s the first sentinel of detection. So West Hawk is a very critical component to being able to do that and obviously it is fully consistent with what the OIE [World Organization of Animal Health] requires of countries. We can make a position statement to the rest of the world that we can regionalize or rezone Canada at the finding of a disease. And again, recognizing that it will always be disease specific, those diseases that are spread by various vectors that aren’t stopping at the border and reporting would not necessarily be impacted. And I come back to the other part of that slide—making sure the rest of the world recognizes that even when a disease does occur it should not necessarily require that all commodities are therefore banned. And that commodity-based risk should be the basis for trade because it allows us to salvage the animals and mitigate the number of interventions that have to be made for the sake of biosecurity.

Mort: I think one of the achievements of this conference has been to work on this relationship between animals and humans. We haven’t really talked about what care is and what good care is, but I think one of the outcomes of the conference has been that we have discussed that good care involves both animals and humans. Those aspects of caring cannot be separated, so that’s what I will take back and I think it’s the beginning of some really important work.

Evans: In my view, what is represented in this room is interdependence. No one sector, no one group, and no one interest here can necessarily say that they’re isolated or that they are not impacted by the actions of other groups. And I think if you really want to consider animal care, particularly in crisis situations, you’ve got to consider all animals. You’ve got to consider wildlife, companion animals, farmed animals, and other types of animals that are maintained in various facilities. Although I’ve heard a lot of people speaking specifically about companion and farmed animals, I think as a veterinary community and as a caring society, we have an obligation to all animal subpopulations. And we need to engage with society at large as to how they want to respond to other animal communities that may not have been represented here.

Covey: I would just like to take a minute to commend Dr. Wittnich. I’ve had a couple of conversations with her over recent months. She is committed and dedi-
lated to working here in Canada to make sure that animals are addressed and that there is a plan in place. I would encourage you to use her as a resource.

Wittnich: I hope somehow there will be access to my e-mail. It is not private or confidential in any way. I know as we grow it’s a bit frustrating. The political part of this can be quite irritating because it grinds so slowly. But I want to let you know that while that political side grinds through the process, there are individuals on the Civil Committee and within other groups who are going to burn my butt if we don’t proceed. So even though we’re not funded, we are highly motivated. There are already groups of individuals who have identified themselves to me who represent the spectrum of NGOs [nongovernmental organizations], veterinary technicians, and veterinarians who could be available and fairly reasonably equipped at a moment’s notice. So if any of your municipalities want any sort of assistance, please feel free to get in touch with me. And stay tuned, this is going to grow.

Raj: I would just like to readdress the question about nitrogen. I’ve been in touch with CFIA colleagues here and we are hoping explore the possibility of using nitrogen in a variety of environments. So something useful might come out and we will keep you all informed.