

Terrorists Plot to Attack Americans Through Food Supply

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While airport security, seaport protection, illegal immigration and other functions of the Department of Homeland Security garner more attention and news headlines, one of the most fear terrorist tactics is the use of the United States' domestic food supply chain to kill as many Americans as possible.

Intelligence sources believe that this type of terrorist plot is being considered by members of several groups including Al-Qaeda. In fact, the DHS has a term to describe such a tactic: Agroterrorism.

US agriculture generates more than \$1 trillion per year in economic activity and provides an abundant food supply for Americans and others. Since the September 11, 2001, attacks, there have been new concerns about the vulnerability of US agriculture to the deliberate introduction of animal and plant diseases.

Several agencies, including the US Department of Agriculture, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Defense, play a role in protecting the nation against agroterrorism.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, federal agencies' roles and responsibilities were modified in several ways to help protect agriculture from an attack.

First, the Homeland Security Act of 2002 established DHS and, among other things, charged it with coordinating US efforts to protect against agroterrorism. The act also transferred a number of agency personnel and functions into DHS to conduct planning, response, and recovery efforts.

Second, the President signed a number of presidential directives that further define agencies' specific roles in protecting agriculture. Finally, Congress passed legislation that expanded the responsibilities of USDA and HHS in relation to agriculture security.

In carrying out these new responsibilities, USDA and other federal agencies have taken a number of actions. The agencies are coordinating development of plans and protocols to better manage the national response to terrorism, including agroterrorism, and, along with several states, have conducted exercises to test these new protocols and the response capabilities.

Federal agencies also have been conducting vulnerability assessments of the agriculture infrastructure; have created networks of laboratories capable of diagnosing animal, plant, and human diseases; have begun efforts to develop a national veterinary stockpile that intends to include vaccines against foreign animal diseases; and have created new federal emergency coordinator positions to help states develop emergency response plans for the agriculture sector.

However, the United States still faces complex challenges that limit the nation's ability to respond effectively to an attack against livestock. For example, USDA would not be able to deploy animal vaccines within 24 hours of an outbreak as called for in a presidential directive, in part because the only vaccines currently stored in the United States are for strains of foot and mouth disease, and these vaccines need to be sent to the United Kingdom to be activated for use. There are also management problems that inhibit the effectiveness of agencies' efforts to protect against agroterrorism.

For instance, since the transfer of agricultural inspectors from USDA to DHS in 2003, there have been fewer inspections of agricultural products at the nation's ports of entry. According to anti-terrorism experts, this is completely unacceptable and the transfer of inspectors from the USDA to Homeland Security should have increased inspections, not reduced them.

To enhance the agencies' ability to reduce the risk of agroterrorism, security experts recommended, among other things, that USDA examine the costs and benefits of developing stockpiles of ready-to-use vaccines and that DHS and USDA determine the reasons for declining agricultural inspections.

USDA, DHS, and HHS generally agreed with many recommendations. However, according to officials at the Government Accountability Office, the Defense Department and EPA made technical comments but took no position on the report's recommendations.

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