

Advances in AGROTERRORISM PREVENTION

Ag Secretary discusses the latest in preparedness
at the International Symposium on Agroterrorism.

by Abby White

What if?" seemed to be the question asked most often at the International Symposium on Agroterrorism. "What if" someone attacked our food supply? "What if" the aftereffects spread like wildfire? "What if" we had another American tragedy?

Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns addressed the conference participants Sept. 27 in Kansas City, Mo., speaking to an audience that included all types of people — from farmers and ranchers to law enforcement officials and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents. Agroterrorism is an issue that involves everyone.

"We know that we can no longer take our safety and security for granted," Johanns said, "and of course a part of that includes our food supply." He continued, "[Agroterrorism is] a subject that is so enormously important, and we must protect our food and our agricultural sectors."

Importance

U.S. producers supply the country with a safe and abundant food supply, even producing enough food and fiber to sell goods abroad. The U.S. also has a transportation system that allows people across the country to have year-round access to fresh fruits, fresh vegetables and fresh meat. People expect the high-quality meat and dairy products that producers constantly deliver.

And the agriculture industry is thriving. Producers have endured hurricanes, floods and droughts, but continue to provide the food and fiber needed by the U.S. and other countries as well.

"Our farmers and our ranchers and all those involved in the ag sector ... might be tempted to take our safe food supply for granted," Johanns said. "That would be one of the biggest mistakes we could make."

Agricultural goods pass quickly from one nation to another and from state to state, but so do diseases and pathogens. Johanns mentioned the recent outbreak of *E. coli* in fresh spinach. Although it was not known to be the result of an intentional contamination, it illustrates how much damage could be inflicted by an intentional act on our food supply.

Threat

"Now, we know of no specific current threat against our ag or our food sectors; however, we know that there are individuals who want to harm us," Johanns continued. "And we are aware that there are people with the knowledge and the capability of sabotaging our food supply."

He urged everyone to be prepared, vigilant and make every effort to prevent any incidences that threaten our food supply.

"The threat to our food and our ag sectors is a real threat, but I believe we are making great progress in increasing our safeguards and mitigating the threats," Johanns said.

Later in the conference, Peter Ben Embarek with the World Health Organization (WHO) addressed the threat and said that attacks against agriculture are unlikely to constitute a primary form of terrorist aggression.

"It lacks visible, immediate effects and shock value," Embarek said.

Since 1912, a mere 12 documented cases involved the use of bioagents against agriculture, of which two could be termed terrorist attacks, Embarek explained.

"However, agroterrorism has potential appeal as a secondary mode of attack," he said. "Economic fallout from a large-scale strike is likely to resonate with the agents of the contemporary international jihadist network. Attacks against agriculture could be used as a novel form of asymmetric warfare to exacerbate the disorienting effects of a more conventional campaign of bombings."

USDA's plans

Working together is important, Johanns said. Cooperation and collaboration are the keys to success. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is working to combat agroterrorism.

"Product tracing is becoming more and more important to our international trade efforts and our ability to protect the food and ag sector," Johanns said. "USDA has a number of arrows in its quiver on this front — the National Animal Identification System (NAIS), Identity Preservation Process, Source Verification Programs and Export Verification Programs. Further solutions in this area will be derived only from effective joint industry and government cooperation."

Johanns said that the USDA is absolutely committed to the private sector. The

government and industry are partnering on process verification programs (PVP) and on the national organic program. They are also reviewing other ideas for applying similar innovative concepts to other areas in agriculture.

"President Bush has provided tremendous leadership to ensure that we safeguard our food supply," Johanns said. "This administration has made great strides in protecting our homeland."

In the last five years, the USDA has expanded its mission to better secure the food supply. A presidential directive has established a national policy to defend agriculture and the food system from terrorist attacks, major disasters and other emergencies. A strategy is being developed and includes the Department of Homeland Security; the Department of Health and Human Services; state, tribal and local governments; and private sector participants.

This strategy will include everything from early warning systems to assessing vulnerabilities and planning how to respond. "The first step we are taking to protect our food supply is ensuring that we have comprehensive awareness of all the threats," Johanns said. "One of our key goals is to expand our surveillance and our monitoring systems to provide early detection in tracing disease and other outbreaks."

He mentioned examples of meeting their goals, including maintaining the offshore pest information system, combating avian influenza globally, and enhancing the ongoing surveillance of food safety systems.

"The second step is to determine our vulnerabilities," Johanns said. "We're doing this through the Strategic Partnership Program for Agroterrorism (SPA)." The SPA proactively sends a team onto the field to do a hands-on assessment of the vulnerabilities.

"I believe that this SPA program really embodies one of the most important aspects

in our efforts to combat agroterrorism," Johanns said. "I'm referring to a partnership. By bringing together governmental entities, along with our friends in the private industry and state and local governments, we are able to more clearly see a comprehensive picture of all the possible threats. This clearer picture allows for more precise planning."

The USDA is sharpening its readiness to operate an Incident Command Center in the event of an attack or an unintentional contamination of the food supply. It will give federal, state and local governments a unified strategy to respond to domestic incidents, Johanns said. There are also state-level emergency response teams and the Extension Disaster Education Network (EDN), which links land-grant universities and helps them communicate potential risks and mitigation strategies to the public.

"We're also working at the ground level to educate farmers and ranchers and veterinarians so that they are able to recognize the clinical signs of biosecurity threats and infectious diseases," Johanns said. "We have a real need for trained experts."

USDA research agencies are collaborating with academia to carry out and coordinate research in the areas of plant protection, animal protection, food safety and other areas. They are also developing a world-class animal disease biocontainment facility that will allow for rapid diagnostic tests to detect and identify pathogens that pose the greatest threat to U.S. livestock.

Johanns also mentioned that the USDA spent more than \$253 million in 2006 on the Food and Agriculture Defense Initiative. In 2007, they are requesting \$320 million.

"Agriculture is a complex and unique industry," Johanns concluded. "Attack it successfully and you shake the confidence of this country."

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