

The Role of the Center for Emerging Issues in Coordinating International Safeguarding Information via the Offshore Pest Information System

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What is the Offshore Pest Information System (OPIS)?

OPIS is an Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)-level, Web-based information-sharing tool that allows users to communicate in an organized manner about offshore animal and plant health events and issues. OPIS is a key instrument used to meet the goals of the International Safeguarding Information Program (ISIP). This program is risk-focused and designed to collect, synthesize/analyze, communicate and utilize relevant offshore animal and plant disease or pest information. As the main communication tool within ISIP, OPIS is secure and enables multiple users to access, respond to, and act upon information about international events that affect animal and plant health.

Why was OPIS developed?

Historically, communication between Veterinary Services (VS) and International Services (IS) about disease events in other countries (“offshore” events) typically took place among a small number of people via e-mail, fax, or conversations. There was no central repository where gathered information was stored or reviewed by different groups. A system to enhance information sharing on animal health events between VS and IS had long been discussed but had not come to fruition, until now.

VS and Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ)—through Safeguarding Review recommendations—set forth the idea of organized communication and information storage leading to better overall analysis and reporting. Prior to the VS Safeguarding Review, PPQ had conducted its own safeguarding review, which identified similar issues found in the VS review. As part of its implementation of recommendations, PPQ worked with IS to design and test OPIS with many of the same goals and features needed for a VS offshore disease reporting system. It was ultimately decided that using one system for international safeguarding would best suit the needs of all players within APHIS. In the fall of 2003, VS, IS and PPQ began working together to recommend changes needed to make one system capable of reporting international animal health events as well as plant events.

In addition to meeting important safeguarding needs of PPQ and VS, OPIS helps APHIS comply with the provisions of Homeland Security Presidential Directive 9. This directive mandates that agricultural systems be defended, and surveillance and monitoring systems for international animal and plant diseases be developed.

How is OPIS used within VS?

Many improvements have been made to OPIS that allow VS users to effectively use the system. Currently, VS uses OPIS for reporting offshore animal health events and for organized discussion of those events, but has a limited user group. There are two groups that now enter most of the animal health events into the system: IS field reporters, and members of the OPIS team at the Center for Emerging Issues (CEI). CEI is one of the Centers located at the Centers for Epidemiology and Animal Health. International field reporters look for animal health events

using contacts, local media, meetings, academic channels and other local resources. CEI enters into OPIS offshore data that is obtained from the Center's daily electronic surveillance efforts, which search for open-source animal health events occurring worldwide. When a report is entered into OPIS, data about the date, location, disease, pathway and reliability of the report are captured in searchable tables. Text-based information about the event is entered, and files and pictures can be downloaded to the report as well. Links can be created, within a report, both to other OPIS reports and to outside Web sites. The reports are distributed to a wider audience via a weekly summary. Anyone with an APHIS e-mail account can sign up as an OPIS user, which enables them to access OPIS reports and receive OPIS weekly summaries. To request an OPIS user ID, click on the following link: <https://secure.opis.info/scripts/APHISregister1.cfm>

In addition to providing information on animal health events for the OPIS reports database, CEI acts as the coordinator for all animal information entered into OPIS. The coordinator role is located within CEI because the work involved in collecting, analyzing and sharing animal health information is synergistic with the mission and work already performed by the Center. As OPIS animal coordinators, CEI staff puts each animal report into situational context and facilitates a dialog carried out within OPIS. All VS stakeholders and subject matter experts are provided the opportunity to participate in the conversation. After an evaluation period, CEI classifies and posts the report as 'Alert', 'News', or 'No Further Action'; the report can also be discarded from the system.

Information stored in the system is used in many different ways. Some information regarding disease levels in other countries is used by personnel at ports of entry. Information is also used to conduct import risk assessments and to identify emerging diseases and other animal health issues. As the database continues to develop, it will be used to analyze global animal health status.

What is the future of OPIS within Veterinary Services?

Enhancements continue to increase the effectiveness of animal health information sharing. For example, VS is currently developing a country reporting module within OPIS in which specific risk-related information will be collected and stored with the purpose of increasing VS' general knowledge base of a country. This database will be a repository for specific countries' information, including endemic animal diseases, import and export data, veterinary infrastructure, laboratory capability, livestock demographics, and other data relevant to the overall animal health picture within that country. This OPIS module will be populated by different groups within VS and IS and monitored for change over time, after baseline information has been established.

VS, PPQ and IS plan to gradually include more reporters and increase the number of OPIS users and event evaluators. It is envisioned that OPIS will serve as the primary method in APHIS for international animal and plant health event and risk information sharing, evaluation, storage, and analysis.

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