

Mitigating Disaster in America's Heartland

by
Lammot du Pont
TOP Program Officer

In the Winter of 2001, livestock farmers in the United Kingdom began to notice their cattle and sheep herds were becoming ill in unprecedented numbers. By February, 2001, it became clear that the deaths were not isolated incidents, but rather the first signs of an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. To ward off further contamination from this highly contagious illness, nearly 4,000,000 cows, sheep, and pigs were slaughtered, and strict quarantine procedures were put in place in both the United Kingdom and throughout the European Union. The outbreak, and the efforts to contain it, devastated local farmers and the regional travel industries. The potential devastation that an incident like this could cause in the United States was brought even more sharply into focus recently when an animal infected with mad cow disease was identified in Canada.



To help ensure that state and local officials have the necessary tools to identify and react quickly to such potential catastrophes – arising not only from outbreaks of disease and natural disasters, but also from environmental accidents or acts of terrorism – TOP awarded a grant in FY 2002 to the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, & Consumer Protection.

Because existing identification systems were fragmented and less than comprehensive – generally only applying to a single breed or designed for a single purpose such as recording vaccinations – a new approach was clearly needed. In the current system, one farm animal may be assigned multiple identification numbers, but no single identifier follows the animal from birth through death. Without the ability to track animals, a disease could spread through the entire food system, undetected until it was far too late.



The new system is designed to link both manual and electronic media from the Department of Agriculture, Trade, & Consumer Protection and its partners cohesively and comprehensively, facilitating detailed and timely report generation. By using the new integrated system, the Department of Agriculture, Trade, & Consumer Protection hopes to reduce the time it takes to identify and respond to an incident from 48 hours to 12 hours.

In addition, the grant will allow the Department to purchase portable, geolocator equipment for their inspection staff. Armed with these tools, inspectors will be able to plot the precise location of facilities, animals, and other details from the properties they visit. The data will be converted into maps for the Department to model the potential spread of diseases or chemical spills.

When fully deployed, the project will serve as a model for other states that are seeking to protect farms and communities from and to respond in a timely, coordinated fashion to future outbreaks and disasters.