

Panhandle Counties Form AgroGuard Program

TSCRA, Cattle Feeders, county sheriffs team up to protect the food chain

By Susan Wagner

Photo by Anita Braddock

Something didn't look right to TSCRA Special Ranger Kenneth Chambers as he made a routine drive down I-40 near Amarillo.

An unmarked, blue sedan had pulled off on the shoulder and two persons on foot were making their way carefully toward one of the area's largest feedlots.

By the time he could pull over and investigate, the pair had already climbed the fence. They were standing in a pen full of cattle, and the man had something in his hand . . .

This time, it was only a camera. An out-of-state tourist was taking a picture of his wife "with all the cows" in the background.

Kenneth advised them they were on private property and politely, but sternly, asked them to leave. Then he went to the feedlot manager's office to report what had happened. The manager's response?

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Indicators of Agroterrorism

- Persons having no interest asking specific questions about a facility or processes.
- Unauthorized photography of processes in or around facilities or farms.
- Possession of chemicals, biological agents, vaccines or medication with no purpose.
- Manuals, communications or Web sites pertaining to chemical or biological agents.
- Attempts to rent or borrow ag-related equipment for no logical reason or purpose.
- Theft of anhydrous ammonia or other chemicals.
- Theft of livestock.

Farmers/Ranchers

Report suspicious behavior around farms or ranches; thefts of nurse tanks.

Cooperatives

Report suspicious activity around anhydrous ammonia storage facilities; attempts to purchase ammonium nitrate or other chemicals, medications or vaccines by those without need.

Transportation

Report any activity around facilities that YOU deem suspicious or "out of place." Report sick or down animals to proper personnel prior to loading or unloading.

Utilize good biosecurity procedures as applicable to your hauling activities. Report unusual activity around transportation vehicles that are unattended at truck stops, rest areas, etc.

Aerial Applicators

Report any tampering or attempts to purchase or rent aircraft or chemicals.

Chemical Handling Facilities

Report any attempted purchase of herbicides or pesticides by those not authorized or those without need. Report all security breaches, if applicable.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Happens all the time.”

Don’t worry about it? What if the man had been an agroterrorist and the thing in his hand a vial of manure or urine infected with foot-and-mouth disease?

FMD can persist in dry manure for 14 days and in urine for 39 days. In the soil, the virus can persist for 28 days in the winter, and three days in the summer. It wouldn’t be hard for a terrorist to acquire and transport.

Spread in the soil among a tightly packed pen of cattle, it’s highly likely that one or more would inhale an infective dose. And once an animal is infected, the virus will multiply and quickly spread to the other cattle in the feedlot.

People, trucks or other equipment coming into contact with the virus would unintentionally spread it beyond the confines of the feedlot, igniting an epidemic.

It’s not an unlikely scenario. U.S. government officials report that a significant part of the al Qaeda training manual is devoted to terrorism directed at agriculture.

It’s an easy target, cheaper and less risky than other types of terrorism, and the economic consequences would be devastating.

Economic impact

Amarillo is home to the Texas Cattle Feeders Association. Feeders in the TCFA area of Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico produced 6.7 million fed cattle in 2005—about 30 percent of the nation’s fed beef.

It’s a \$7 billion industry with a total economic impact of \$19 billion by the time it circulates through the hands of people and businesses in the region.

Unintentional spreading of foot-and-mouth disease resulted in 2,030 confirmed cases of the disease during the 2001 outbreak in Great Britain at an estimated cost of \$15 billion!

Approximately 3,962,000 animals were slaughtered, including

597,000 cattle, 3,219,000 sheep, 142,000 pigs, 2,000 goats, 1,000 deer and 1,000 other animals.

“If that kind of loss occurred from a naturally occurring epidemic, imagine the devastation from a planned terrorist attack in this area,” says Special Ranger Chambers.

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Randall County Sheriff Joel Richardson is leading the effort to start AgroGuard program in the area, a plan that has already proven successful in Kansas and New Mexico.

Ten county sheriffs have already signed on, as well as TSCRA, Texas Cattle Feeders Association, West Texas A&M University and the Texas Wheat Producers Association.

“The idea is to make people in all phases of agriculture aware of what could possibly happen in agroterrorism and report any suspicious activity,” says Chambers. “The front line workers at each site are in the best position to know whether an activity is normal or not,” he adds.

These are the people that Richardson is trying to reach with short presentations at feedlots, meetings of farmers and ranchers and other groups involved in the food chain.

Ranch hands, feedlot cowboys, pen riders, livestock haulers, truckers who transport agricultural products, aerial sprayers and those who handle agricultural chemicals are learning to recognize suspicious activity and report it to local law enforcement officials.

“We need more people watching out here in this area, because it’s so spread out,” emphasizes Special Ranger Ben Eggleston. “It takes me four hours to get from one end of my district to the other. But with AgroGuard if somebody calls me with something suspicious, I can make a call to local law

enforcement and they’ll check it out.”

Encouraging local law enforcement to be proactive in protecting agriculture is one of the primary objectives of AgroGuard.

How it began

The idea was conceived in Ford County, Kan., after 9-11. Concerned individuals in the ag industry began asking how they could report suspicious activity.

In short time, a research team was formed and the Kansas Animal Health Department and Kansas Bureau of Investigation became involved. In 2003, the National Institute of Justice awarded KBI a \$234,000 grant to support a research project on terrorism and agriculture.

A fundamental point in the research report was that law enforcement strategy toward the threat posed by agricultural terrorism remains largely reactive, if not passive. That had to change.

As the organizers began educating local ag workers and law enforcement officers, enthusiasm for the program spread to neighboring counties and eventually to neighboring states.

Funding the program

In New Mexico, the Department of Agriculture provided start-up money for the program. New Mexico State University moved it along with a \$250,000 grant from the state’s Homeland Security Office, and now the state is obtaining sponsorships.

Sheriff Richardson hopes something similar will happen in Texas. Meanwhile, the Panhandle group is handing out brochures and AgroGuard signs bearing a local number for reporting suspicious activity.

“Read the brochure and learn what to look for,” urge the TSCRA Special Rangers. “What people learn from AgroGuard, will not only help with agroterrorism; it will reduce livestock and equipment theft.” ■