

BORDER protection and people smuggler activities are key concerns for many Australians. The media has successfully kept the community regularly informed of these issues.

The human welfare concerns associated with people drowning at sea and the interception of illegal drugs and firearms are a high priority to many.

But when it comes to the potential issue of animal and pest disease entering Australia via unauthorised boat arrivals, there has been little discussion and attention paid.

What is not discussed in any detail by politicians is the impact a disease outbreak would have on agriculture in this country.

History shows that Australia has been fortunate in avoiding many disease outbreaks which have crippled the economies of other nations.

What is not widely known is that the movement of people can cause diseases to spread from humans to animals.

Researchers from the Roslin Institute of the University of Edinburgh found that a strain of bacteria jumped from humans to chickens.

It is believed to be the first clear evidence of bacterial pathogens crossing over from humans to animals and then spreading since animals were first domesticated.

Dangers posed by Asian citrus psyllid, citrus canker, and foot and mouth disease are excluded through Australia's biosecurity operations.

The Roslin Institute research, however, shows clearly the new dangers that can result from the movement of bacterial disease across borders as a feature of globalisation.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry admits that a disease such as foot and mouth is highly contagious and would have severe consequences were it to be introduced into Australia.

The department acknowledges that there have been a number of outbreaks in foot and mouth disease-free countries that have had large socioeconomic impacts.

It has been reported that the 2001 outbreak in the United Kingdom caused losses of more than 8 billion pounds, about \$19 billion.

While foot and mouth rarely infects humans, there is plenty of evidence that the

Imported ag disease risk is real

Simon Livingstone
Principal, Marcus Oldham College, Geelong



disease can be carried on the clothes and skin of people who have been in infected areas.

So although it is unlikely that a foot and mouth disease-infected human would bring the disease into Australia, there is a chance that without adequate quarantining, the disease could enter in foodstuffs brought in illegally, or on the clothes of people who arrive under the radar.

A 2011 ABARES update of a Productivity Commission report estimated that over a 10-year period there would be severe direct economic losses to the livestock and meat processing sector from an outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Australia.

It is estimated that these losses could range from \$7.1 billion for a small three-month outbreak, to \$16 billion for a large 12-month outbreak.

The Department of Agriculture states that Australia has a good track record of successfully dealing with outbreaks of disease in its animal populations – the most recent example being the large outbreak of equine influenza in 2007.

However, the department realises that an outbreak of foot and mouth disease could have dimensions significantly greater than anything we have had to deal with in the past.

While Australia has excellent quarantining regulations and processes, and excellent immigration processes, these processes can be bypassed as people enter the country undetected and illegally.

Because of the potentially devastating impacts a major disease outbreak could have, the issue of animal and pest disease prevention needs to be given some priority and public discussion in the context of illegal immigration.

A significant outbreak of animal or pest disease in this country would have a catastrophic impact on Australia's ability to capitalise on the predicted future agricultural boom, and indeed our sector's long-term survival.

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