



Report on the Pandemic Preparedness Workshop for the Agri-Food Industry

24 February 2006

1. Background to the Workshop:

The hosting of a workshop on pandemic preparedness in the agri-food industry was approved by the members of the Canadian Supply Chain Food Safety Coalition during a member's conference call on 19 January 2006. The objectives set for the workshop were:

- to explore the implications of pandemic planning for the agri-food industry; and
- to consider what initiatives and mechanisms might be put in place to facilitate its working together and with governments.

This initiative, while not directly related to the matter of food safety, was seen by the members as being within the Coalition's mandate to "facilitate dialogue within the food industry and with all levels of government".

2. Proceedings:

Heather Holland, chair of the Canadian Supply Chain Food Safety Coalition, welcomed participants to the workshop and thanked Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada for both assisting the preparations for the workshop and hosting it at the Canadian Emergency Preparedness College. She reviewed the day's overall objectives and noted that the session was a natural extension of the Coalition's work on emergency preparedness which had begun at the Hot Nosh workshop in November 2005. Holland reviewed the agenda, noted the changes required by the unavoidable absence of the speaker from the Public Health Agency of Canada and indicated that to start the session off, participants would be asked to comment on their expectations for the session and on any planning that their association had already undertaken.

Bryan Walton, Vice President for National Affairs of the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors, provided an update on the current state of private sector/government planning for a pandemic. He noted that the federal government had formed a private sector committee which involved a wide range of sectors from finance to transportation to food. However, he expressed the view of CCGD that this high level committee could not serve the particular interests of all and that some sector based dialogue was required. Walton reported that CCGD had set up a pandemic planning committee and begun to work its way through number of issues and to build on its experiences with SARS and with the recent animal health incidents (e.g. BSE, avian influenza). The CCGD plan would go through three phases - information gathering, template building and refinement - and cover food safety, operations, human resources and labour relations at a minimum.

The participants provided input on their expectations for the day. These included: gaining a better understanding of pandemics and their impact; clarifying the state of government

planning; getting answers to specific questions related to government support (e.g. access by workers to employment insurance); establishing a strong communications link with government and industry; grappling with providing information and advice to hundreds or thousands of small business members; understanding industry needs and expectations of government; exploring any particular food industry issues; etc.. Industry participants from the poultry or animal sectors indicated that their involvement to date was heavily focussed on animal health related issues. Several others indicated that they had begun to explore the issues.

This discussion was followed by a series of presentations and question and answer sessions. Steven James, Director of Economic Analysis and Forecasting at the federal Department of Finance, provided department's latest assessment of the economic impact of a pandemic (see attached presentation). Finance Canada's work has involved an extensive review of the macro economic effects of the 1918, 1956/7 and 1968 influenza epidemics. This analysis indicates that these effects were significant during the peak period of these epidemics but that overall the economy bounced back quickly with little evidence of loss of output, reduced consumer spending, etc.

Brian Miller, president of Vanguard Emergency Management Consulting Inc, provided a primer on business continuity planning with specific suggestions based on the unique nature of a pandemic (see attached presentation). He noted that during this type of emergency businesses have a special duty of care to their employees which includes providing leadership, health and safety at the workplace, compassion and support for the stress that may occur. Miller reviewed the basic principles of emergency and contingency planning emphasized the important role that communications will have. He also noted that because the pandemic will impact most on human resources, the plans that are put in place must fully take this into account, particularly with respect to redundancy. During the question period, it was noted that businesses needed to review policies, such as sick leave medical certificate requirements, as in the midst of a pandemic these would likely be unobtainable.

Janet Bax, Senior Director of Infrastructure Assurance at Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, reviewed the federal government's current planning activities (see attached presentation). She noted that these were distinct but grounded in the national pandemic plan that had been agreed to by federal/provincial/territorial health ministers. Bax reported that federal departments were now being challenged to develop business continuity plans for themselves as important service providers to Canadians. This will include prioritization of services, clarifying roles and responsibilities, planning for the needs of its employees, etc. This work is being co-ordinated by a committee of deputy ministers and has resulted in the establishment of six committees - international issues, federal business continuity and human resources, public health and emergency management, communications, economic and social impacts and private sector relations. She also reported that officials representing the federal, provincial and territorial governments had recently agreed to recommend to Ministers that they collaborate in pandemic planning. This jurisdictional issue remains to be settled. She concluded by stating that the federal government recognized that its private sector committee could not do all the work and that some additional consultative/planning mechanisms were needed. The input of the workshop participants was solicited.

The presentations closed with a case study of pandemic planning at the municipal level by Jill Collins of the Ottawa Pandemic Preparedness Committee. She noted that local public health, hospital and emergency preparedness officials had agreed in 2004 that a co-ordinated

approach to pandemic planning was required. This work had proceeded and a plan has been prepared. It ties into the Ontario plan which ties into the Canadian plan. The local plan clarifies which agency does what and seeks to minimize serious illness, death and societal disruption. Ottawa's experience suggests that collaboration is possible at the local level and that many groups are interested. The participating organizations now include long term care facilities, seniors homes, community clinics, family doctor groups and even the funeral directors.

3. Conclusions:

At the conclusion of the presentations, the members of the Coalition discussed two questions:

1. How should the agri-food industry and the governments work together in pandemic planning?
and
2. What role, if any, should the Coalition have respecting on-going pandemic planning?

The members present strongly supported the concept of a government/agri-food industry subcommittee as the forum for on-going work on pandemic planning in this sector. This would build on the broader, private sector/government committee that is already in place. They noted that this new committee should have a number of responsibilities including ensuring that food industry associations and the government have in place the necessary collaborative mechanisms to respond to a pandemic, that the agri-food industry is encouraged to plan for a potential pandemic and that the unique implications of a pandemic for the food industry and Canadian consumers are explored.

The members present also agreed that the Coalition should assume the responsibility for coordinating the participation of its members in this new government/industry subcommittee. It was also agreed that this mandate would need to be reviewed once the process has started and the required on-going mechanisms are sketched out for consideration by governments and industry.

The Coalition executive was asked to take the next steps required to establish the government/industry committee and to keep its members fully informed of developments.

4. Next Steps:

The Coalition executive has requested that Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada assist it in forming a federal government/agri-food industry subcommittee on pandemic planning. The first meeting of this agri-food sector subcommittee is expected to occur in early April.

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6 March 2006