

Small lot holders, their biosecurity risk and strategies to reduce that risk

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Rural Australia has experienced a demographic shift in the last forty years where there has been a move from a landscape dominated by large commercial family farms, to one we now see which includes large farms interspersed with rural residential properties and weekenders. The peri-urban or small lot holders (SLH), form part of our rural landscape and bring with them a diversity that enriches and strengthens rural communities. They have for many years been regarded as a high biosecurity risk. Their lack of farming background and subsequent level of knowledge, especially of biosecurity practices, puts them at risk for the introduction and spread of exotic disease and pests. Although they potentially lack experience in certain areas, many are also knowledge seekers and are motivated to “do the right thing” by their animals and neighbours.

Although Government has probably never dealt with this sector adequately, the withdrawal of Government extension services has seen a marked reduction in the contact with this group in most states. Although not ideal, the small lot holders in general don't perceive the Government to be a good source of knowledge for their farm and may in some sectors be viewed with suspicion.

The main concerns from this sector include the lack of biosecurity knowledge and the amount of informal trading of sheep, cattle and pigs. Informal trading means traceability is compromised and will slow or hinder control in the event of an emergency animal disease (EAD) outbreak. Any focus in the area should aim to increase compliance and must include the pig trading small lot holder as this is a particularly high risk for the introduction and establishment of Foot and Mouth disease (FMD).

The lack of investment in this small lot holder extension requires a coordinated response from all relevant stake holders, to ensure better use of existing scant resources.

Characterising small lot holders

To address the biosecurity deficiencies of small lot holders one has to take into account the diversity of the segment. They are not a uniform group and vary widely in some key demographics and engagement and this has important ramifications for the design of interventions to reduce biosecurity risks.

In 2015 a workshop was held to address some of the issues to do with small lot holders. The workshop group agreed that segments of the SLH population differ in some key attributes, including (this is not an exhaustive list):

Motivation;

- Level of existing knowledge (about farming, biosecurity practice);
- Openness to change / adopt new practices / learn (the precise wording was not agreed, but the sentiment was);

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Kluver, P - Small lot holders, their biosecurity risk and strategies to reduce that risk

- Degree of commercial focus;
- Accessibility; and
- Cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic background.

With these attributes in mind, the group attempted to develop profiles of the main SLH segments. The outputs of the discussion are captured below in raw form. Some of the 'features' described are of course generalisations but based on the group's experiences of working with individuals within these segments.

'Traditional'

The stereotype for this group might be the southern European-born peri urban farmer who raises small numbers of livestock including pigs for home consumption and small goods production.

Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have non-English speaking background, home-kill livestock, wary of authority, travel / have visitors from overseas, unregulated buying/selling of livestock, traditional / religious practices, have (often) worked with animals, (specific) social networks, less tech-oriented, not information seekers, diminishing as a group? (maybe not), poorly understood / defined
Messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal requirements • Raising awareness of emergency animal disease impacts / reasons behind legislation
How to reach?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language, culture-specific (e.g. translators) • Simple • Through community (leaders, churches, newspapers, migrant resource centres), schools, rates notices, farmers' markets • Positive 'hooks' – e.g. how to butcher

'Lifestyler'

The stereotype for this group might be the tree-changer professional couple.

Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed species (of livestock – few pigs, chickens, cows, sheep etc), new to animals, no agricultural productivity driver, educated, affluent, may pay for services, rural residential, pets/higher-valued animals, don't feel part of agriculture, social conscience / idealistic / 'greenie', don't know what they don't know (but want to the right thing), more tech savvy, motivated, mobile, vocal, often working, may conflict with (more traditional) neighbours, don't know how to deal with feral pests, time-limited, may have physical limitations (e.g. elderly), more likely to call vet, retired vs young, small size, attend field days, share animals (e.g. boars), lack infrastructure
Messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are part of agriculture / the community • Welfare obligations • Local contact • What to do – basics, legal responsibilities • Health of animals / people (not just \$ or legal)

Proceedings of AVA Annual Conference, Adelaide, 2016.

Kliver, P - Small lot holders, their biosecurity risk and strategies to reduce that risk

How to reach?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landcare • Pocket guide • Internet / social media • Field days / specific workshops • Through vets (mixed, even small animal) / Australian Vet Association • Newsletters • Commercial links • Local council
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'Niche'

The stereotype for this group might be the small organic or lavender grower.

Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial, business plan, similar idealism to 'Lifestylers' but with economic driver, more inclined to engage paid services, organic / small cheesemakers / alpaca / lavender / truffles etc, respond to market incentives, reputation important, sell to farmers' markets, familiarity with accreditation (e.g. QA) systems, part of professional networks, access to advocates, significant proportion of income from farm, potentially time-poor, not trading / using saleyards but may be showing, market savvy, value-add, early reporters, responsive, antibiotic-free, cooperatives, may be leasing to increase scale
Messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biosecurity is part of best practice • Competitive advantage (from good biosecurity) • Healthy animals • Could be allies / advocates / sentinels
How to reach?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmers' markets and associations • Internet / social media • Feed merchants • Boutique slaughterers / butchers • As per lifestylers

'Absentee landholder'

This is a group that crosses the other described segments, as well as large commercial farmers – the problem is at the smaller end where alternative supervision / management arrangements are weaker. The stereotype for this group might be the professional who has purchased rural land but lives in the city and only visits occasionally, or the miner who has invested in a block of land in Queensland but spends most time in WA at the mines.

Proceedings of AVA Annual Conference, Adelaide, 2016.

Kliver, P - Small lot holders, their biosecurity risk and strategies to reduce that risk

Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Range of attitudes / receptivity to learning – may start with good intentions but lose interest or time, may be ‘real estate farmers’ and have little care for day-to-day matters, challenge is communicating (because of absence), often a problem with feral animal or weed control / fire response / welfare etc leading to risk, delayed reporting, low input, social issues (may arouse neighbour resentment), often quite affluent and educated
Messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obligations / regulations, need for regular checking • Welfare • Ability to be contacted • Responsibility
How to reach?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult • Councils – rates notices? • ‘Sacrificial hanging’ (make an example of someone who breaches regulations)

A couple of other possible segments were raised, including ‘periurban’ and ‘small-scale farmers’, but it was agreed that these were concepts were ill-defined and/or largely captured in the other segments.

The workshop group agreed that the ‘Niche’ and ‘Lifestyler’ segments are the easiest to reach and communicate with, because they are generally motivated to do the right thing and will seek information. ‘Absentee landholders’ are more difficult because they are difficult to access, as is the ‘Traditional’ segment, which presents cultural and linguistic barriers and a mistrust of government and related services. Little is known about the ‘Traditional’ segment and more research is needed.

Recommendations

1. There is a need to undertake a comprehensive gap analysis and develop a coordinated communications / extension strategy to reduce biosecurity risk in the ‘traditional’ segment of SLH.
2. Research is required, into topics including (among others):
 - Rates of compliance / non-compliance with biosecurity-related regulation and practices among different segments
 - Differences in risk factors between segments. This research needs to be refreshed periodically due to the high turnover of SLH, particularly in some segments.
3. There is a need for a coordination body for SLH biosecurity and a repository for resources – there is a substantial stock of excellent resources already available and these could be shared, but there is a risk they will be lost as some agencies scale back their focus in this area.
4. NRM/CMA/Landcare groups are underutilised for biosecurity extension. There is an opportunity to provide extension materials for distribution through NRM groups nationally, coordinated through the Department of Agriculture, although this is currently not core business for these groups and biosecurity varies from area to area.

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Kliver, P - Small lot holders, their biosecurity risk and strategies to reduce that risk

area depending on the interest of the coordinators. Interested parties should approach Dean Jones.

5. A major challenge identified by the workshop group is determining who takes responsibility for championing / coordinating future progress in working with SLH. There is a requirement for an overall body to champion the cause of this group.