

Posters for Protection and Prevention: Integrating Case Study Posters to Help Law Enforcement Understand Agroterrorism in an Emergency Training

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Introduction

Agroterrorism is defined as the “acts of terrorism intended to damage a country's agricultural production or food supply” (Merriam-Webster, 2014, para. 1). This form of terrorism can often be easily achieved by criminals due to the abundance of agriculture and opportunities that come with the large amount of rural land in America. But the mechanisms of detecting such crimes are scarce because it is often hard to trace actions to a criminal (Knowles, 2011). Many times, the crimes are enacted through mimicking natural disasters and outbreaks or attacking the vulnerability of agricultural systems that lack robust security (Linacre, 2005). When law enforcement agencies encounter instances like bomb threats and hostage situations, they are likely handling a case of terrorism. However, if suspicious actors were to sneak around a farmer's property searching for trade secrets, they may go unnoticed from law enforcement personnel. However, in some extreme scenarios, such as an example with *Chinese seed threats*, those cases could involve individuals who have a criminal intent guiding their actions, such as stealing expensive corn data for a rival government or researching how to poison the field to hurt the farmer and the local economy (FBI, 2019).

Guided by the U.S. Global Health Security Strategy (GHSS; 2024), a whole-of-government approach is needed to provide a safe and secure nation. Specifically, law enforcement agents often respond to several emergencies where their authority is needed, but no criminal activity is involved (Weber, 2024). A decisive response is an invaluable tool when it comes to these types of scenarios, but a law enforcement agent cannot respond to an emergency decisively if they do not fully understand the various threats that may be possible. As a result, we created 10 case study posters focused on agricultural emergencies to be displayed with a goal of advancing agricultural literacy and awareness of necessary stakeholders in the event of an agricultural emergency.

How it Works

Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program (NADPRP), we designed the Agricultural Preparedness Training (APT) to provide agricultural readiness materials for law enforcement personnel, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) officers, emergency managers, Extension agents, and agricultural educators. The APT agenda included highlights of agroterrorism risks, overview of response and recovery elements in the agricultural industry, overview of the risks associated with the food supply chain, risks with the plant science industry, a mock crime scene, and multiple agriculturally related tours. Through each experience, participants engaged with potential agricultural threats and identified ways to safeguard and protect the industry. To support the agricultural training, we provided case study examples where agriculture intersected the law enforcement domain.

Thus, we designed 10 posters to hang in the conference room to provide a deeper understanding of agricultural threats, whether intentional or unintentional (see Table 1). We designed each poster with similar branded elements and to be 18” x 24”. Each poster included the title of the case study, a picture from the incident or an image that portrayed similar events, a concise overview of the incident, and a bulleted list of three-to-five takeaways that can be easily understood, but more than anything, applied to a law enforcement audience.

Table 1*Summary of Case Study Poster Topics Displayed at APT with the Associated Date(s)*

Case Study 1: Sunland Racetrack Equine Herpes Virus (2016)
Case Study 2: High Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI; 2024)
Case Study 3: Ruidoso Downs Feed Issues with Botulism in Horses (2022)
Case Study 4: Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD; no specific date)
Case Study 5: Rajneesh Bioterror Attack with Salmonella (1984)
Case Study 6: Winter Storm Goliath in West Texas and Eastern New Mexico (2015)
Case Study 7: Chinese Seed Threats (2024)
Case Study 8: Listeria Outbreak in Bluebell Ice Cream (2010–2015)
Case Study 9: Intentional Adulteration with Antibiotics (no specific date)
Case Study 10: Cyber Attack at JBS (2021)

Note. We purposively selected each case study to include a balance of natural disasters, malicious actors, and high-risk concerns to the food and agriculture sector.

Results to Date

Guided by a subject matter expert team, consisting of statewide veterinarians, public health officials, emergency managers, retired law enforcement, and Extension personnel, we received positive feedback on the posters. Participants stated they appreciated the real-world connection that each poster brought to the program, and they specifically highlighted the bulleted takeaway section as useful and practical. Retired law enforcement appreciated the various examples provided that included a balance of natural disasters (unintentional) and “bad actor” (intentional) scenarios where individuals intended harm to the affected populations. The posters also spurred dialogue about potential local scenarios that participants may experience in their local communities, which will hopefully provide a starting place for future investigations.

Advice to Others

If hosting a similar conference for non-traditional agricultural audiences, we recommend tailoring agricultural information to be conducive to their agricultural literacy levels, and to make specific suggestions for how those cases intersected various jurisdictions with a balance of intentional and non-intentional emergencies. For example, one of the case studies we included was the Rajneesh salmonella attack where a cult tried to sway voter results by poisoning an entire county (Oh, 2017). Another study that was not an instance of agricultural terrorism, but of an agricultural threat, such as equine herpes at the Sunland Park racetrack in southern New Mexico (Times Staff Report, 2016). In this scenario, agricultural professionals as well as law enforcement agents had to think quickly to quarantine livestock on the racetrack while also balancing emotional horse owners, trainers, and jockeys. The value of displaying a balance of scenarios will provide a well-rounded and practical introduction to investigative needs related to the agricultural industry. We reinforce that not all emergencies involve criminal intent, but we also want participants to be prepared to investigate multiple avenues if necessary.

Costs and Resources

We printed the 10 posters using FedEx online for approximately \$155 (FedEx, 2022). We also used Adobe InDesign to design the posters, so a subscription to Adobe would be helpful or another design software, such as Canva. No other costs were associated with these case studies.

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