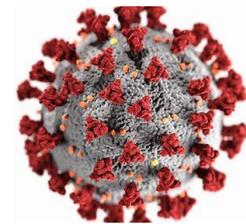




Leading MPI and the Primary Sector during COVID-19

LESSONS LEARNED

Ray Smith, Director-General MPI



MPI's COVID-19 response focused on active engagement with, and support of, the primary sector, protecting MPI's staff whilst also contributing to the wider all-of-Government COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. We've learned some lessons along the way.

Business Continuity Planning does matter

The decisions that previous MPI management teams had made to move to a mobile technology base made it possible for staff to adapt quickly to working and deploying from home. Although we had an existing business continuity plan, the plan needed 'dusting off' and contextualising for a pandemic scenario. We learned that we needed to be flexible in our leadership style, switching leadership as the pandemic moved from a border risk to community transmission and full-blown business disruption. Moving critical business functions such as payroll and accounts payable to remote working early enabled us to test how these would operate. We learned some lessons about how our network would operate with all staff accessing from home which we couldn't have foreseen in our formal BCP but these issues were resolved relatively quickly.

Listening to the '*weak signals*' and acting early

We were alerted to the potential global disruptive effects of COVID-19 from early January 2020 due to its potential health impact on our biosecurity staff working with passengers, our insights into the China market and the immediate impact on demand for rock lobsters and logs.

These were classic '*weak signals*' from a health and safety perspective. We could have waited until official advice to act but we decided to move early by establishing a response function which focused on: the health and safety of our people, particularly our border staff and the welfare of our international staff, as well as access to personal protective equipment, liaising with the other border agencies, and the development of tailored business continuity plans. Our Senior Leadership Team (SLT) started daily meetings on COVID-19 from early February and we began to transition increasing numbers of staff to working from home.

Immediately following the Prime Minister's announcement of Alert Level 2, we directed that all remaining staff who could work, or be deployed from home, would do so. MPI was able to operate during Alert Levels 3 and 4 with 90% of its workforce working from home or being dispatched from home.

Health came to prominence

Traditionally, health and safety at MPI meant a focus on physical risks. COVID-19 made us think more deeply about the health risks that present themselves to our staff working at the border. Before COVID-19, our staff would interact with 20,000 international travelers a day. We had probably not given due consideration in the past to the health risks that these personal interactions posed for our staff and the potential controls that could be introduced to lower the risk of communicable diseases generally. We quickly established new protocols, physical screens and PPE for staff. We learned that unless agencies have sufficient stock of PPE readily on hand, it was very difficult to get reliable supplies when the pandemic became evident globally and within New Zealand.

An opportunity for sector leadership and strengthened relationships

As soon as the timetable for moving to Alert Level 4 was announced by the Prime Minister and we knew that the bulk of the primary industries would be able to operate under new health and safety practices, we convened industry heads and designed a safe working practice framework and registration process for industries and their supply chains.



Changes to work practices and a strong verification process was vital to reduce the likelihood or spread of COVID-19 in industries that typically employ large numbers of staff working in close physical distance, such as the meat industry and the horticulture sector. More importantly was the need to maintain the confidence of workers and unions as well as the social license of these industries to continue to operate within vulnerable rural communities with limited access to tertiary health facilities.

The registration process commenced on 24 March. On 27 March we completed 645 industry education visits prompting the registration system. In total we verified 11,626 businesses remotely and on-site.

We took a very active role with the red meat industry, in particular, to establish working protocols for each alert level that provided safe working arrangements. This has involved working with the Meat Industry Association, unions and Assure Quality to build confidence that safe ways of work can be developed and maintained. MPI has used its presence at meat plants to verify that the protocols have been adhered to. Although the protocols have had an impact on production rates, they have protected staff and the industry from the effects of COVID-19 evident in other countries.

As the country prepared to move to Alert Level 3, we began working with WorkSafe New Zealand on the preparation of safe practice guidance for businesses that would be able to re-start in Alert Level 3. This collaboration continued through to 5 May when a team of circa 100 MPI employees began to assist WorkSafe

by making phone calls to approximately 3000 primary sector businesses that were able to re-start operations in Alert Level 3 to confirm their adherence to WorkSafe's safe practice standards.

The sector appreciated the visible leadership of MPI in areas where we had limited regulatory powers but a moral and practical authority to lead. The strengthened relationships that developed during the crises period have largely continued into our work with the sector over economic recovery plans. The opportunity and challenge is to maintain these strengthened relationships in the primary sector as the country recovers.

We recognised that Alert Level 2 would see a transition of staff back to work across the public service. There was a the need for consistency across the sector and as the lead for health and safety, the Government Health and Safety Lead worked closely with the State Services Commission, the PSA and the Government Property Group to create principles and guidance to support this transition.

Staff confidence and mental health mattered

We learned that regular communication was important to maintaining staff confidence.

Challenges such as isolation, home working conditions, home schooling or having young children at home and sometimes less than ideal equipment set-ups emerged as issues after the initial novelty of working from home wore off. We responded with daily team virtual meetings, regular staff newsletters with information on mental health and tips on working remotely, and the targeted provision of extra equipment such as chairs, large screens etc.



Returning to work needed to be gradual and was slower than we initially thought it would be due to a range of factors, including a growing preference for working from home, fears about public transport and general concerns over social distancing. We were able to address these with a graduated return to work programme, extra emphasis on hygiene and social distancing at the workplace and one-on-one plans for staff with more serious reservations.

We know that we will need to be mindful of ongoing and delayed mental health issues that will no doubt follow the pandemic in time. A greater number of staff are interested in working from home to some extent and we expect more requests for flexibility in the future.

Lastly, we also took time to acknowledge our own reactions and concerns as leaders. We acknowledged the impact of family commitments on us as well as the cumulative impact of fatigue arising from long hours and stress. These pressures led to subtle changes in the rhythm and pace of our leadership at points along the way.

Conclusion

We are pleased with our response but did have learnings along the way. This experience has really highlighted some key areas for me, including;

- The need for strong leadership and effective communication – this has to come from the top, and when it comes to communication, you can't over-communicate.

- The role of effective engagement to enable a rapid response.
- The importance of good risk management and assurance around controls – this extends to business continuity planning and low likelihood high consequence events.
- That it's tough but important to make timely decisions and to take a leap of faith when you know it's the right thing, even if you're first.