



Crisis hits home when least expected

Lessons in communications from Feed Central

This project is a collaboration between the Queensland Farmers' Federation and the Queensland Government to support Queensland farmers.

Introduction

As a business that buys and sells hay and fodder from across Australia, Feed Central in Toowoomba has a heightened appreciation for biosecurity and the risks of spreading unwanted pests and diseases via its supply chains. As a result, the business has implemented new strategies to ensure it can communicate effectively with staff, customers and industry, if a crisis arises in the future.

About the Business

Founded by Tim Ford in 2002, Feed Central has grown to become Australia's leading independent provider of hay and fodder quality assurance.

It provides fodder inspections and quality assurance testing on thousands of tonnes of hay each year, spanning visual assessments and inventory audits, through to laboratory analysis for nutritional content and feed contaminants.

Based in Charlton, just west of Toowoomba, the business is near to fire ant control areas in the region, meaning the risk of product contamination is always front of mind.



The Crisis Risk

Tim Ford says biosecurity breaches pose a major threat to his business, as well as to the entire fodder industry and the farmers who depend upon it.

“No-one wants to be introducing a pest into another region. They've got green snails in Western Australia, so if we're going to bring that hay to Victoria or Queensland, in the case of extreme drought, we have to be aware of everything that can go wrong.” Tim said.

As well as coordinating the supply and sale of hay from across the country, the company owns Toowoomba Hay Farm, which produces and retails hay on site beside the busy Warrego Highway.

Farm manager Gerard Harms says the threat of fire ants is a risk that keeps him up at night.

“If fire ants were found within our product or within our region and stopped our export of hay into NSW or other regions of Australia, it would be our worst-case scenario.” Gerard said.

Preparation and Prevention

Several members of the Feed Central team participated in the Managing Communications During a Crisis training workshops coordinated by the Queensland Farmers' Federation.

“I think it's really important that we put across a consistent, framed message. For us it was all about gaining those skills so that we could supply that credible story all of the time,” Tim said.

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“There's always that adrenaline hit when there's a crisis and that can lead to panic and just going with your first thought,” Cara said.

“I think the training has prepared us to stop and think, which calms the adrenaline a little bit and means we're not going off the cuff or reacting, because we have a plan and the time to think things through.”



Crisis Communications

Feed Central has implemented new communications protocols to respond to inquiries, whether they are from the media, a supplier or customer, or a member of the local community. These include:

- Ensuring all inquiries are directed in the first instance to the relevant subject matter expert within the business.
- Taking time to gather as much information as possible.
- Discussing the issue to develop a considered response.
- Presenting that response in the most appropriate manner.

It also includes strategies to reduce the emotional toll on staff who are often dealing with people under financial and emotional pressure.

“Our clients are already under pressure because they're buying feed due to a drought, flood or fire, or they're selling feed because they've suffered from a frost. Tim

“Giving our team the knowledge and understanding to be able to narrow those conversations down to how we can help those people has been really important to us.”

For Gerard Harms at Toowoomba Hay Farm, that means being transparent with customers about issues like the biosecurity threat of fire ants.

“Maintaining that relationship with our customers and our suppliers, so that you can pick up the phone and have those difficult conversations, is a key part of our business,” Gerard said.

From Preparation to Practice

The Feed Central team tested their preparation and procedures after an accident involving an external contractor working at their facilities.

Tim says the situation demonstrated the importance of putting in place a process which forces people to stop and think before responding.

Upon learning of the accident, the team was alerted to the possibility of media inquiries. A response was prepared for reception staff that enabled them to capture inquiries from the media without commenting on the situation at hand.

This step provided Tim and Cara with time to determine whether commentary in the media would be appropriate, and to consider the most appropriate method of communicating with members of the general public, whether in person with neighbours or by correcting speculation that may appear on social media.

“We started working on a media release in case that was needed,” Cara said. “We considered what our response would be if there was a curlier question.”

“If a topic might be a little sensational, Tim and I will sit and have a conversation as to how to best react and ensure our response is measured, moderate and factual, so that our business and the industry is presented in the best light.”

In this instance, the media didn’t call, but the staff were fully prepared and knew how to appropriately discuss the situation, even if they were asked by a friend at the local pub.

“Hope for the best and prepare for the worst. Cara said.



Managing Communications during a Crisis

This project is a collaboration between the Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) and the Queensland Government to support Queensland farmers.

QFF is the united voice of agriculture in Queensland, representing the collective interests of peak agriculture industry organisations (both state and national) to build a strong future for Queensland's agriculture sector.

To deliver the skills and training component of the Managing Communications during a Crisis project, QFF has partnered with Blue Hill Agency – an agriculture communications company – to equip farmers with tools to better handle communication during a crisis.

This project provides training sessions for stakeholders and farmers to prepare them to navigate future crises, ensuring a coordinated and responsive communication approach that mitigates risks, enhances decision-making, and maintains the integrity of businesses during disruptive events. The goal is to build a culture of preparedness and resilience through improved communication and crisis management practices.





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Access Crisis Communication Resources

The Managing Communications During a Crisis project provides practical tools, resources and training to help Queensland farmers prepare for and respond to unexpected events.

Feed Central's experience highlights the importance of having a clear communications plan in place, taking time to gather facts before responding, and maintaining transparent relationships with staff, customers and industry stakeholders during challenging situations.

Scan the QR code to access resources, guides and training materials developed through this project.



Additional Media Resources

For further information about biosecurity risks, fire ant management and the importance of preparedness in the agricultural sector, readers can explore the following resources:

- Feed Central: Fire ants and hay – what you need to know
<https://www.feedcentral.com.au/fire-ants-hay-heres-what-you-need-to-know/>
- ABC News: Fodder drops continue despite fire ant concerns following Queensland floods
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-03/fodder-drops-continue-despite-fire-ant-concerns-qld-flood/105131266>
- Nine News: Fire ant eradication efforts continue in the Toowoomba region
<https://www.nine.com.au/australia-news/qld/fire-ants-queensland-toowoomba-eradication-program-cotswold-hills-20260430-p5zsom.html>

These resources provide additional context on the biosecurity challenges facing the fodder industry and reinforce the importance of preparation, clear communication and coordinated responses during times of uncertainty.