

PACIFIC NORTH WEST BORDER HEALTH ALLIANCE BACKGROUND BRIEFING DOCUMENT

BACKGROUND:

New and emerging diseases have underscored the need to ensure that geopolitical and jurisdictional boundaries do not impede infectious disease control and surveillance efforts. Diseases do not respect borders, making effective global collaboration critical in an age of escalating world travel and trade.

Without a single planning entity to address issues along the US-Canadian border, states, provinces and territories are in various stages of organizing with neighbouring jurisdictions. State, provincial and territorial public health leaders have taken the initiative in planning meetings that provide an opportunity for colleagues on both sides of the border to gather face-to-face and begin to tackle some of their common challenges.

It is universally recognized that health infrastructure requires sufficient capacity to address extraordinary demands (surge) related to emergencies impacting the public health and/or health care delivery systems. Mutual assistance and collaboration agreements are therefore recognized as a key platform for the creation of surge capacity.

The Security and Prosperity Partnership Agreement, signed by the United States, Mexico and Canada in 2005, includes a public health component, which incorporates a commitment to establish a mutual aid agreement (MAA) for assistance during public health emergencies.

In 2004 British Columbia and Alberta signed a memorandum of understanding with respect to collaboration on the use of available public health and health services resources during emergencies. A similar memorandum of understanding was signed between British Columbia and Washington State in 2006.

Since 2004 the Washington State Department of Health and the British Columbia Ministry of Health have jointly sponsored an annual Pacific North West Cross Border Public Health Workshop on emerging public health issues, including pandemic influenza. The sixth workshop is scheduled for May 26-28, in Vancouver.

These workshops have reinforced the need to formalize existing informal communication/ collaboration through agreements or memoranda of understanding between public health partners, and a commitment was made to continue that work. Parties agreed to undertake a collaborative approach to use of available health service resources to prepare for, respond to and recover from public health emergencies. They also agreed that existing formal and informal agreements that support meeting such demands during emergencies need to be clarified to ensure a common understanding, and to explore possible new areas of joint collaboration.

To date cross border collaboration has enabled public health officials to discuss, and compare response plans, and build on best practices developed in other jurisdictions in addressing issues as diverse as Norovirus, Lyme Disease, and Measles. The existing collaborative relationship can be strengthened and a common understanding can be reached by formalizing and extending existing informal communication networks through the creation of the Pacific North West Border Health Alliance.

DISCUSSION:

Recognizing the need to institutionalize the informal partnership arrangement that had sustained the workshop, the 2008 Cross Border Public Health Workshop (Bellingham) endorsed the creation of a *Pacific North West Border Health Alliance (PNWBHA)*.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been developed in response to this identified need. It will provide a framework for further collaborative work, including mutual assistance and interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration.

The new alliance will encompass the Provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan, the Yukon Territory, and the States of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington thus replicating jurisdictionally the Pacific North West Economic Region (PNWER).

The PNWBHA will institutionalize the current informal cross border working groups to ensure sustainability of the collaborations and provide a framework for further collaborative work, including mutual assistance and interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration.

In 2008 PNWER endorsed the establishment of the *Pacific Northwest Border Health Alliance* to coordinate health preparedness across the region. This innovative agreement between the PNWER jurisdictions is intended to allow the region to respond to surge capacity demands on health systems and health resources efficiently and in a cost effective manner when public health emergencies arise in any PNWER jurisdiction. The arrangement also allows states-provinces to assess current and explore future areas of operational responsibility that could result in efficiencies when providing health services

The Memorandum of Understanding creating the *Pacific North West Border Health Alliance* will provide a framework for further collaborative work, including mutual assistance and interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration in the Pacific North West.

In addition, the Memorandum of Understanding will provide a base upon which to pursue new and/or enhanced initiatives that:

- strengthen and enhance existing prevention, detection and response capabilities, such as, improved coordination in responding to emergencies; enhanced laboratory diagnostic capacity and security; updating stockpiles of necessary vaccines, antibiotics and antidotes; and ensuring all participating jurisdictions have trained staff ready to respond to any crisis; and

- promote coordinated response plans, particularly between bordering jurisdictions, to avoid duplication of effort, fill in identified gaps, and maximize the leverage of limited resources

CONCLUSION:

The *Pacific North West Border Health Alliance*, through the Joint Coordination Committee, will enhance the working relationship among member states and provinces and territories in responding to both routine and emergencies public health and health service demands.