

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RE SUBMISSION FOR THE INQUIRY INTO ENVIRONMENTAL BIOSECURITY

This submission is my personal views, not an official response from my current or previous employers, and is reflection on my experience in the delivery of biosecurity regulatory functions over the last 24 years. I was previously employed by the federal Department of Agriculture (formally DAFF, DAFF Biosecurity and AQIS). I am no longer working for the Commonwealth and am currently employed by the Government of South Australia, Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources.

The adequacy of arrangements to prevent the entry and establishment of invasive species likely to harm Australia's natural environment was improved by the adoption of some of the recommendations of the Beale Review 2008.

In particular the 'risk return' concept and the increase engagement with other agencies adopted by the Department of Agriculture (DA) staff as part of the National Cargo Surveillance Strategy. The objective of this activity was to implement a surveillance program by frontline DA at locations where imported goods initially landed in Australia. It involved inspections of imported cargo and site surveillance of areas surrounding the import operations focusing on exotic pests, weeds and plant disease. Such areas as container terminals, wharves where bulk cargo was landed, container depots and transport yards, airfreight cargo areas and importers premises. Traditionally DA staff attended these premises to undertake the inspection and or verification of specific goods (that were assessed as posing a biosecurity risk) but this strategy extended beyond the goods to examine the immediate surrounds where imported goods were handled to check for escapees, hitchhikers or accidental imports such as weeds, invertebrates and plant diseases.

Nationally, the strategy not only obtained some significant results in detection of exotic pests and diseases but also in confirming their absence too.

CASE STUDY 1: In Adelaide at the Flinders Adelaide Container Terminal, an exotic snail *Eobania vermiculata* commonly known as chocolate banded snail was detected through this surveillance activity. The early detection of the presence of this population of snails would not have been made if it was not for the surveillance activities undertaken by the DA staff. It can only be assumed that the snail(s) arrived on a container imported from overseas and they made their way to vegetation within the precinct in search of food. How long they had been there is unknown but evidence would suggest that a large population was becoming established across

a bank of dense vegetation as part of the water drainage system in the facility. This incursion posed significant risk of spread due to the nature of the operations in the container terminal i.e. full and empty containers are distributed from the terminal to metropolitan and rural locations within South Australia but also interstate.

Ecological Threat: With *Eobania vermiculata* having a long lifespan from 2 to 5 years an established population can continually grow. The long lifespan could make this species grow from a minor concern to a major concern for native gastropod species, garden plants and agricultural crops alike. Vineyards are very threatened with *Eobania vermiculata* being observed on grape plants in their native range (Europe). Potentially that makes this snail a direct threat to the wine industry. Closely related species are known agricultural pests in Australia.

(<http://www.tsusinvasives.org/database/choco-band-snail.html>, Cowie R. H., Dillon R. T., Robinson D. G. & Smith J. W. (2009). "Alien non-marine snails and slugs of priority quarantine importance in the United States: A preliminary risk assessment". *American Malacological Bulletin* 27: 113-13)

The close working relationship and co-operation with industry, Biosecurity SA and the technical support within DA supported a rapid and decisive response to this incursion. Surveys to establish the spread of the incursion were conducted by DA technical staff within the terminal and in a joint exercise outside with SA Biosecurity staff. The legislative framework to act on such issues in property that was crown land, operated by a commercial entity on leasehold arrangement with requirements under Maritime security as well as a Customs controlled area was somewhat problematic. However, the operator agreed to undertake appropriate action based on technical advice from DA in order to manage the risk. This involved significant cost to the operator both in people and equipment and was completed in a timely fashion. Ongoing monitoring to verify the success or otherwise is being undertaken but there was a high degree of confidence that it was a success.

The mandatory 100% external inspection of imported shipping containers was brought in as part of the Increased Quarantine Intervention strategy in response to the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in the UK in 2001. This was reduced in around 2009 to a regime of external inspection of high risk containers and around 40% of the remaining imports. This reduction of intervention was implemented as part of the Beale Review recommendations and whilst this 'risk return' approach recognises that resourcing can better target areas of higher risk it also requires verification processes to be maintained to validate the effectiveness of the measure being put in place. The National Cargo Surveillance Strategy is an important process that should be supported, resourced and funded appropriately so it can be maintained on an ongoing basis.

CASE STUDY 2: At Perth domestic airport an exotic browsing ant – *Lepisiota frauenfeldi* was detected through surveillance activities conducted by DA staff as part of the National Cargo Surveillance strategy. Very limited information was available on the economic or environmental significance of this species of ant but it was not known to be present in Australia and its proximity to where international flights and air cargo was handled indicated it would be more than likely arrived via that pathway.

Extensive delimiting surveys were conducted by DA over several months to establish the extent of the incursion, which was centered on cargo handling premises within the airport precinct but had spread to adjacent reserves and businesses. To complicate matters, construction and redevelopment of the site was being undertaken which potentially was spreading the incursion with earthworks and movement of equipment across the site.

The delimiting surveys establish a significant spread of the ant which posed more an environmental threat and one of social amenity rather than of agricultural significance. The communication and relationship with authorities in the early part of management process was somewhat disjointed and testing as there was difficulty in establishing the jurisdictional issues and who was to take the lead. Was it DA, WA Agriculture, Airport Authority, Department of Environment or local council?

Similarly there was difficulty in establishing responsibility for the various areas where the incursion was present as the landholders, leasers and tenants ranged from the airport authority, to Government agencies, private industry, public reserves and roadways.

In the end the Tramp Ant Consultative Committee were engaged and an eradication was agreed to. Funding was provided and a contract with State Department of Agriculture to undertake an eradication campaign was commenced. By all accounts this also has been successful as ongoing surveillance and monitoring have not detected any further colonies.

Both these cases show some common issues that the committee might wish to consider;

- The benefit of the National Cargo Surveillance Strategy conducted by the Department of Agriculture.
- The existing strong communication links between the Department of Agriculture and their State colleagues in both South Australian and Western Australia.
- The support required of other stakeholders and industry in the import environment.
- The legislative and jurisdictional challenge in responding to such incursions i.e. who takes the lead, what powers do they have to enforce activities to undertake eradication.
- Will the new federal Biosecurity Act reflect environmental risks as well as agricultural risks? The new WA Quarantine Act has a lean towards agricultural pests and diseases rather than environmental ones.
- The need to identify some scenarios to workshop with relevant agencies to assist in development of response plans so activities can be streamlined for efficiency and effectiveness. One agency should be given the responsibility and powers to take the lead and manage response to such incidents.
- Response management really needs people who can operationalise the activity and use the technical / science based resources to provide specific advice. This generally allows for a more rapid response with real outcomes.

Other considerations as part of this submission

- The attention given to marine pests and their translocation is an emerging issue that we should be taking the international lead on
- Cargo Compliance Verification is another program used by Department of Agriculture to counter check the effectiveness of assurances provided by importers, their agents and overseas suppliers. This has also revealed some very worthwhile results that have environmental biosecurity risks as well as serving to increase awareness by the importing community of the need to be vigilant when dealing with imported cargoes.
- Awareness campaigns such as the See, Secure & Report and general messaging about the importance of biosecurity provide a valuable insight into the types of pests that are slipping past the barrier. The Department of Agriculture has staff dedicated to the Post Quarantine Detection program and data is kept of the incidents that are encountered. This data would be worth evaluating as part of the review.

Andrew Triggs

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