

DONNYBROOK ORCHARD IMPROVEMENT GROUP

23rd January 2014

Submission to:

Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

Subject: Implications of the use of Fenthion on Australia's horticultural industry

Submitted by: Donnybrook Orchard Improvement Group

1. Donnybrook Orchard Improvement Group (DOIG)

The Donnybrook Orchard Improvement Group (DOIG) has a membership of fruit growers from the shires of Donnybrook/Balingup, Capel, Bridgetown and Nannup in the South West of Western Australia.

The group is apolitical and is self funded by membership subscription. As indicated by the name the purpose of DOIG is to provide a network for growers to join together to enhance knowledge of fruit production and presentation. We have traditionally liaised closely with an officer of the WA Department of Agriculture and with Fruit West and through the Department, Fruit West or independently we initiate or participate in various field walks and visits by overseas or other experts in our industry.

The membership of DOIG includes a number of large stone and pome fruit growers and also some citrus, cherry and vegetable growers. Collectively DOIG producers pay substantial industry levees...

Members at DOIG meetings maintain an informed interest but do not normally become involved in industry policy or political issues as the focus of our meetings is on growing good fruit. We recognize and support Fruit West as our industry organization to address policy and political issues.

Our decision to break with our normal protocol and to submit our view to your enquiry arises from our concern that a small very vocal sector of our industry is damaging the whole industry by insisting that they can not grow fruit without the use of fenthion as an unrestricted cover spray.

2. Management of Mediterranean fruit fly

Many of our members have had a long experience with managing medfly. We acknowledge the research and sound advice that has been provided by DAFWA and international visitors and accept that in our area and also in the Perth Hills District medfly can be managed successfully without fenthion cover sprays.

Indeed there is a substantive argument that the sole use of cover sprays as a control mechanism has been a major contributor to the extent of medfly infestation in the Perth Hills District. The fenthion cover spray kills the medfly egg or maggot within the targeted fruit but leaves the base population of medfly free to breed. The medfly problem will persist so long as this base population of medfly is permitted to breed and grow without control.

It is scientifically acknowledged that, unlike Queensland Fruit Fly, medfly does not have indigenous plant hosts. Medfly requires exotic fruit trees and or some exotic garden species to breed and proliferate. Medfly cannot breed in the natural bush land of Western Australia or most of southern Australia as there is no suitable host plants. The evidence also suggests that medfly does not travel over long distances. If there is a medfly problem within your orchard or within your town or community it is highly likely that you are breeding the medfly on site.

There is ample evidence produced over many decades that medfly can be totally controlled by integrated baiting schemes. Many local shires have moved from high infestations to virtually zero infestation in very short periods by implementing a comprehensive baiting procedure. These schemes invariably fail because of dissention within the community over cost sharing or property participation. They do not fail because the procedure is ineffective.

International experience and modern control methods now becoming available further enhance the opportunity for effective control without fenthion cover sprays.

Baiting for control of medfly involves placing globules of attractant imbedded with a killing agent on the leaves of the trees. The fruit is left chemical free and indeed much of the effort can be on non fruiting trees or leaves of trees before maturity and post harvest. New mechanisms for trapping and other non invasive control mechanisms similarly leave the fruit chemically free.

Lay persons within the community that are the consumers of fruit are understandably not well informed on the distinction between total impregnation of fruit with chemical cover spray such as fenthion and the management of medfly by a non invasive baiting method.

DOIG members are alarmed because we consider it is stupid and damaging for vocal small sectors of our industry to proclaim to the public and community leaders that the industry must use this dangerous chemical fenthion, and it is a dangerous chemical, it is common knowledge that fenthion can be used to poison eggs to kill crows or as a substitute for 1080 to kill foxes. It is a relic that has survived in orchards since DDT and

Arsenic were withdrawn from common use more than half a century ago. It is appropriate that, if fenthion is used at all, its use should be subject to utmost scientific rigor.

3. Implications for Horticultural Industry

We live in a world that demands food that is sustainable, environmentally friendly, caring for livestock, and chemical free. The major retailers, quite appropriately promote these qualities. Fruit growing is a fragile business and every opportunity should be taken to promote the clean green image of WA fruit. Western Australian growers are free of some of the worst fruit growing problems and are able to grow fruit with minimum chemical use.

The primary goal of a vocal sub sector of our industry appears to be the retention of Fenthion as a cover spray for the control of medfly and our members have grave concerns about the long term market impact of such a single purpose objective that is widely displayed and supported by negative propaganda in the public media...

The consumers of fresh produce in Australia, North America and Europe are extremely conscious of the provenance of the products they consume and this awareness is rapidly extending to Asian countries such as China and Singapore. Just this month some local supermarkets have announced that they will only sell chicken from RSPCA approved farms. Supermarkets already have sales of pork restricted to pork from farms with approved growing conditions. Sea food has established a world wide sustainable branding code. Similarly organic fruit and vegetable sales are growing at about 30% annually because the public perceive them to be safer.

Marketing is about perceptions. Technically organic produce may be no safer than other produce indeed there are examples where the bacterial hazards may be greater with organic produce. What matters is what the public perceive and the marketing arms of major retailers quite validly exploit these perceptions to increase market share.

Our concern is that the publicity arising from the actions to retain fenthion are seriously undermining the image of Western Australian fruit. Quite simply if the consumer perceives the fruit to be impregnated with chemicals they will not buy it. The supermarkets will have no choice but to respond to market concerns and source their fruit from areas that they can declare as clean and chemical free. The implications for WA fruit are horrific.

The activists are also promoting the concept that without fenthion as a cover spray there will be no stone fruit grown in WA. This concept has been supported by various negative press displaying failed orchards as a consequence of chemical restrictions. There is evidence that major retailers are already taking steps to ensure alternative supplies from other states.

The concept is totally wrong. Western Australia has a robust fruit industry that will prosper and produce good fruit without fenthion. The damage to the industry does not arise from the restrictions on fenthion; unfortunately the damage to our market and the industry is caused by the irrational advocacy of those opposed to the restrictions on fenthion.

Our members consider that the activists are seriously damaging our market with incorrect information and propaganda to support an illogical position. .

4. Considerations

The members of our group request that the Standing Committee recognise that good fruit can be effectively grown without the use of fenthion as a cover spray and that in a world market that is increasingly cautious of all chemicals the cessation of fenthion as a cover spray is inevitable.

We support the rigorous scientific research as provided by the APVMA and are prepared to accept their original position in regard to the use of fenthion. We urge that full weight be given to the scientific advice.

We respectfully submit that the substantive issue is for orchardists to be prepared to adapt to the changing circumstances and to implement cooperative control policies on their orchards, and with neighbouring orchards and local communities to manage the medfly pest.