

Australian Greens Minority Report

Environmental Biosecurity

Introduction – a serious problem

1.1 The Australian Greens acknowledge the evidence set out in the Committee's report, and we support its recommendations. However, we remain concerned that the Committee's recommendations are focused on further reviews and investigations while there are concrete solutions on the table already. We are also concerned that the Committee has not adequately acknowledged that environmental biosecurity poses a very serious problem for Australia, and that institutional change is required if we are to address it.

1.2 As discussed in the Committee's report, it is difficult to measure rates of incursion and naturalisation of invasive species, and it is difficult to settle on a benchmark for success given that it is impossible to eliminate risk completely. Unfortunately it is clear that whatever benchmark is used, Australia's biosecurity system is failing our environment.

1.3 As submitted by the Invasive Species Council (ISC), Australia's record on environmental biosecurity is poor:

Australia is a world leader in the extent of invasive species threats to the environment. Invasive species have already caused the extinction of more than 40 Australian mammals, birds and frogs, and are second only to habitat loss in the numbers of Australian species and ecological communities they threaten. We lead the world in mammal extinctions due to invasive predators, and many more mammals are on the brink...Australia's most recent State of the Environment report (2011) gave the worst possible ratings for invasive species impacts on biodiversity: 'very high' and 'deteriorating', and found that management outcomes and outputs are 'ineffective'.¹

1.4 Many other submitters to the inquiry concurred that environmental biosecurity is prioritised below biosecurity for industry and human health, and that performance has been poor as a result.² Importantly, the Beale Review of biosecurity in 2008 and the Hawke Review of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) in 2010, reached the same conclusion, finding that pathways and risks were poorly understood, institutional arrangements were inadequate, and risks to the environment have not received high priority for funding compared to risks to industry.

1 Invasive Species Council, *Submission 74*, p. 4.

2 WWF-Australia, *Submission 56*, p. 2, Dr David Guest, *Submission 43*, p. 1, Dr Andrew Burbidge, *Committee Hansard*, 8 October 2014, p. 11, Plant Biosecurity Cooperative research Centre, *Submission 32*, p. 3.

1.5 Assertions from the federal Departments of Agriculture and Environment that environmental biosecurity is 'effectively managed using a risk-based approach'³ and the implication that the environment is adequately protected by the current arrangements are concerning, and indicate an alarming unwillingness to change their approach.

1.6 In particular, the federal Departments did not give any indication that they were willing to change their approach apart from proposing to 'continue to integrate environmental issues into existing governance structures, functions and activities and to strengthen collaboration and consultation with relevant stakeholders, including community members.'⁴ This is effectively a prescription for business as usual.

1.7 The submission of the ISC was endorsed by 30 environment organisations including the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Humane Society International, the Wilderness Society, State conservation councils and many others. The Australian Greens agree with the ISC's conclusion that Australia's environmental biosecurity system has 'serious, systemic flaws including ineffective institutional arrangements and processes and insufficient funding'.⁵

Environment Health Australia

1.8 The Australian Greens support the call for a new national body similar to Environment Health Australia (EHA) as proposed by the ISC. This body would bring together major participants in environmental biosecurity and involve the community sector in order to improve Australia's environmental biosecurity preparedness, improve capacity, conduct prioritisation, monitor and report on progress. Crucially, EHA would provide a separate voice in decision making and planning.

1.9 EHA is supported by the ISC and the 30 environment organisations which have endorsed its primary submission; other highly credible submitters also acknowledge that institutional arrangements are inadequate. The CSIRO submitted that:

There are currently few resourced institutional arrangements for environmental biosecurity to underpin a timely, coordinated and collaborative approach to prevent and reduce the adverse impacts of invasive species in Australia.⁶

1.10 The CSIRO also identified some concrete examples of the failures partly caused by a lack of dedicated focus within the system on environmental biosecurity. In particular, no assessment and prioritisation of species threatening the environment has been conducted since 2009.⁷

3 Department of Agriculture and Department of the Environment, *Submission 59*, p. 1.

4 Department of Agriculture and Department of the Environment, *Submission 59*, p. 16.

5 Invasive Species Council, *Submission 74*, Executive Summary, p. 1.

6 CSIRO, *Submission 48*, p. 13.

7 CSIRO, *Submission 48*, p. 8.

1.11 Environmental consultancy Wild Matters also identified that recommendations relating to prioritisation and surveillance of high-risk pathways in the Beale Review, Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity (IGAB), National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement (NEBRA) and the National Invasive Plant Surveillance Framework have not been implemented.⁸

1.12 We acknowledge arguments against the establishment of a body similar to EHA from the Departments of Agriculture and Environment, but in light of the government's failure to acknowledge that major change is required, we recommend that EHA be established. The Departments and Animal Health Australia were concerned that the creation of an additional agency would further fragment the biosecurity regime.⁹ However, without a separate voice inside government it is clear that the current system is failing the environment.

1.13 The Department of the Environment is scheduled to lose 670 staff, or about one quarter of its workforce by 2017–18 as a result of recent budget cuts. Expecting the Department to continue even the current inadequate level of activity is therefore entirely unreasonable. A separate body with dedicated responsibility for long-term planning according to environmental priorities is essential.

1.14 Many players are understandably concerned that scarce resources may be diverted from current activities to fund EHA if it were established, so we emphasise that resources for EHA should be new funding and must not come at the expense of front line services or biosecurity planning in other areas.

Recommendation 1

1.15 The Australian Greens recommend that the government establish and resource the proposed Environment Health Australia that can act as the key body for environment health in the same manner as Plant Health Australia and Animal Health Australia, and that this body establish a partnership between community, governments and environmental businesses in order to deliver high priority policy and planning in environmental biosecurity.

Recommendation 2

1.16 The Australian Greens recommend that the federal government fund Environment Health Australia on an equal footing with Plant Health Australia and Animal Health Australia and at a minimum level of \$20 million over 5 years, with co-contribution from State and Territory governments of at least \$10 million over 5 years. This funding must not come out of existing funding for biosecurity measures.

8 Wild Matters Pty Ltd, *Submission 35*, p. 5.

9 Mr Stephen Oxley, First Assistant Secretary, Wildlife and Marine Division, Department of the Environment, *Committee Hansard*, 31 October 2014, p. 25 and Ms Plowman, Animal Health Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 31 October 2014, pp 44–43.

Environmental Biosecurity planning and review

1.17 The Australian Greens support the recommendations of the Committee relating to proposed reviews of the functioning of the environmental biosecurity system, but we believe that those reviews should be undertaken by a newly-established EHA. In addition to the recommendations of the Committee, we propose several other bodies of work for the new EHA to undertake.

Recommendation 3

1.18 The newly-established Environment Health Australia should, through a transparent, scientific process, identify and rank Australia's priority environmental biosecurity threats. Undertake pathway analysis of these high priority threats to identify where biosecurity should be focused.

Recommendation 4

1.19 The newly-established Environment Health Australia should develop a timetable for bringing environmental biosecurity planning up to the level achieved for plant and animal industries.

Recommendation 5

1.20 The newly-established Environment Health Australia should, within 3 years, develop contingency plans for 30 high priority environmental pests.

Recommendation 6

1.21 The newly-established Environment Health Australia should establish an independent expert panel to review recent incursions and to recommend ongoing responses to those incursions and reforms to reduce the risks of future incursions. An immediate priority should be to review whether smooth newts are eradicable.

Beale Review

1.22 The Australian Greens remain supportive of the highly regarded Beale Review and believe that the government should capitalise on the widespread support for the Beale Review by implementing its key recommendation to create a separate Biosecurity Agency.

1.23 We refer to our Additional Comments in the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee inquiry into the Biosecurity Bill 2014 and related Bills¹⁰ which contain further detail on our position in relation to the Beale Review.

10 The report is accessible here:

http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Rural_and_Regional_Affairs_and_Transport/Biosecurity_2014/Report

Recommendation 7

1.24 The Australian Greens recommend that the federal government implement the key recommendations of the Beale Review, in particular the creation of a separate Biosecurity Agency, with a Director that is separate from the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture.

Yellow crazy ants

1.25 There are many dangerous invasive species with potentially devastating impacts on biodiversity, but the Australian Greens wish to draw particular attention to yellow crazy ants to support recent calls for funding and to serve as an example of how the current system is failing the environment.

1.26 Yellow crazy ants have infested an area of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, which is home to 60% of Australia's butterfly species and 32% of our vertebrate species, with 12% of those species found nowhere else in Australia. Thirty animal species and 74 plant species which are threatened under the EPBC Act could fall further into danger as a result of this infestation.

1.27 As Dr Lori Lach submitted, the cost of doing nothing and allowing yellow crazy ants to take over is likely to far outweigh the relatively modest cost of eradication. A draft cost-benefit analysis conducted in 2012 has revealed that the cost of inaction to Australia's economy could be up to \$3 billion, including a \$58 million cost to agriculture.¹¹ This figure may still understate the true costs, as Dr Lach has submitted, since it failed to consider loss of property values, declines in tourism and impacts of pesticides on the Great Barrier Reef.¹²

1.28 Of course, monetary costs are a severely limited way of assessing the impact of biodiversity loss, and Australia has international obligations to safeguard biodiversity under the *Convention on Biological Diversity*. As Dr Lach observed, 'How do you put a dollar amount on the Cairns birdwing butterfly going extinct?'.¹³

1.29 The fact that the costs of environmental destruction cannot easily be reduced to dollar values is yet another reason why a strong independent voice for the environment is desperately needed. In this respect, yellow crazy ants serve as a useful example of the way delay, lack of coordination and a failure to prioritise and fund environmental protection has plagued the biosecurity system.

1.30 Delay caused by decisions under the NEBRA and by the Queensland government to shift away from eradication have led to a blow-out in the infested area from an estimated 300 hectares in 2012 to around 804 hectares in April 2015.¹⁴

11 Dr Lori Lach, *Submission 76* – Supplementary Submission, p. 4.

12 Dr Lori Lach, *Submission 76* – Supplementary Submission, p. 5.

13 Dr Lori Lach, *Committee Hansard*, 11 November 2014, p. 63.

14 Dr Lori Lach, *Submission 76* – Supplementary Submission, p. 2.

1.31 The Australian Greens support recent calls by the new head of the Wet Tropics Management Authority, Mr Scott Buchanan, for funding of at least \$1.3 million per year for 10 years to eradicate yellow crazy ants in the region.

Recommendation 8

1.32 The Queensland or federal governments should urgently allocate at least \$1.3 million per year for at least 10 years towards the eradication program for yellow crazy ants before more time is lost to delay.

**Senator Larissa Waters
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