

Additional comments by Independent Senator Nick Xenophon and DLP Senator John Madigan

The (Zebra) Chips are down

1.1 The fresh potato industry in South Australia and Victoria, and indeed throughout Australia, is one of the most important agricultural assets we own. This industry needs and deserves protection from the introduction of pests and diseases that will threaten its very livelihood.

1.2 Importing fresh potatoes from New Zealand exposes Australia's potato industry to an unacceptable level of risk of exposure to Zebra Chip Disease (and its vector the Tomato Potato Psyllid), a condition that causes infected potatoes to exhibit black stripes and a burnt taste which renders the potato inedible. The livelihoods of hundreds of Australian producers, as well as Australia's international reputation as a high quality potato producer, will be put at risk should Zebra Chip Disease enter Australian borders.

Effect of Zebra Chip Disease in Australia

1.3 South Australia produces more potatoes than any other state or territory in Australia and makes up approximately 80 per cent of production of fresh washed potatoes. South Australia also has the largest land area under crop, valued at \$206 million at the farm gate.¹ The farm gate value of potatoes in Australia in 2011-12 was \$557 million. Victoria accounted for approximately 18.6% of this output with \$108 million.²

1.4 The importation of potentially diseased potatoes from New Zealand will have devastating flow on effects throughout Australia should SA's and Victoria's potato industry be put at risk. As explained by Ms Robbie Davis, CEO of Potatoes South Australia:

There is little doubt amongst us in South Australia, in the industry, that South Australia has the most to lose if zebra chip enters Australia. Using the New Zealand and USA experiences as a benchmark, we would witness more than \$100 million in lost production value due to the effects of the psyllid and the disease. I want to add this though: despite South Australia's dominance in this industry, this is a national issue and we are all here with that in mind. It is why we are sitting with the Tasmanians and Victorians. Collaboration across borders is absolutely critical. At a national level we produce 1.2 million tonnes; New Zealand's is 300,000 tonnes. In South Australia, and in Australia, we can only compete on quality. Premium quality is our competitive advantage. If the Australian potato crop is contaminated by zebra chip alone, without considering the other pests and

1 Ms Robbie Davis, Potatoes South Australia Inc., *Committee Hansard*, 24 October 2012, p. 1.

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in Agricultural Commodities Australia, Cat No.7121.0 (quantities) and, ABS Value of Agricultural Commodities Produced, Cat No.7503.0 (values).

diseases, the industry's farm gate value and the value all the way down the value chain to the consumer could potentially halve. Just at farm gate this is a quarter of a billion dollars.³

1.5 AUSVEG, the national peak industry body representing the interests of Australian vegetable and potato growers, echoed these concerns:

The risk to the Australian potato industry posed by diseases associated with fresh potatoes from New Zealand is far too large to take. In 2009-10, the production value of our industry was over \$600 million, with around 2,000 growers contributing to this. Yet the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry seems willing to risk it all based on out-of-date and poorly examined science.⁴

1.6 How then have we arrived at this position where imports of fresh potato from New Zealand are even being considered?

New Zealand's market access request

1.7 Currently Australia does not import fresh potato from any country. Previously fresh potato imports from New Zealand were accepted, however imports ceased in 1988 after New Zealand were unable to guarantee the absence of the quarantine pest Potato Cyst Nematode. In 2006 the New Zealand Government requested market access to Australia for fresh potatoes for processing. This discovery of Zebra Chip disease and its vector, the Tomato Potato Psyllid, in New Zealand in 2008 resulted in an outright ban on imports of potatoes and other host materials. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures ('SPS Agreement') required Australia to conduct a risk assessment in order to put in place permanent measures surrounding the possible importation of potatoes in the long term.⁵

1.8 What followed was a Pest Risk Assessment ('PRA') of Zebra Chip Disease and the Tomato Potato Psyllid conducted by DA Biosecurity in 2009 resulting in the *Draft report for the review of import conditions for fresh potatoes for processing from New Zealand* ('draft report'). The draft report was released for stakeholder comment in July 2012, with 27 submissions received in total by September 2012. In October 2012, DA Biosecurity appointed Dr Alan (Chris) Hayward to conduct a review of the draft report and summarise the current literature on zebra chip disease.

Concerns about the draft report and Dr Hayward's review

1.9 The committee detailed the wide spread criticism levelled at both the draft report and Dr Hayward's review by many in the industry, including AUSVEG and the Potato Processors Association of Australia Inc. In their submission to the inquiry the Potato Processors Association of Australia Inc supplied the committee with advice

3 Ibid, pp. 1-2.

4 Mr Richard Mulcahy, AUSVEG, *Committee Hansard*, 24 October 2012, p. 22.

5 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *New Zealand Potatoes and risk assessment*, Additional information provided by DAFF Biosecurity, 24 October 2012, p. 1.

received from one of Australia's leading entomologists, Dr Paul Horne, in response to the draft report:

It is regrettable that the Advice does not provide the standard of science and rigour that one would expect from such a document. Statements of opinion are expressed as fact and referencing other than to Government publications is minimal. One can only assume therefore that most of what is written is therefore opinion and does not qualify as science. This is unfortunate as we are lead to believe that the approach to biosecurity must be science based (C Grant pers Comm.) Based on what is presented in the Advice Australia can have little confidence in either the ability of DAFF to assess risk and to manage the subsequent consequences should this proposal for imports go ahead as presented.⁶

1.10 Other criticism included the lack of scientific knowledge regarding Zebra Chip disease, partly because this is a relatively 'new' disease in scientific terms, having only been reported for the first time 20 years ago. Concerns were also raised that the draft review released by DA Biosecurity in 2012 relied entirely on literature published in or before 2009 despite the emergence of new information. Dr Kevin Clayton-Green wrote:

No attempt has been made by DAFF to update their science of the past three years since the "Final pest risk analysis report for 'Candidatus Liberibacter psyllaourous' in fresh fruit, potato tubers, nursery stock and its vector the tomato potato psyllid (PRA) was produced (2009) despite the following statement quoted from p5 of the Advice:

"any additional information made available through the literature and the consultation process which is relevant to the assessment of the import risks posed."⁷

1.11 DAFF's complacency in relation to the need for inclusion of more up to date scientific information was made abundantly clear during the committee's public hearing in October 2012:

Senator XENOPHON: Can we go to the issue of risk assessments though. I guess risk assessments are valid at the time that they are done. Why hasn't there been an update? There is a lot of new evidence that has come to light in terms of tuber transmission, the fact that other psyllids are found to carry the disease, the fact that it can infect other crops. Why wasn't that included in a proper scientific and legal assessment as to whether to accept or reject New Zealand potatoes? Isn't that reasonable? If you are to have a robust system in place, surely you need to update it because there has been a significant new amount of knowledge that has come into play?

6 Potato Processors Association of Australia, Submission 1, Appendix 1, Dr Paul Horne, *Response to Draft report for the review of import conditions for fresh potatoes from New Zealand, Biosecurity Advice 2012/14*, August 2012, p. 1.

7 Potato Processors Association of Australia, Submission 1, Appendix 2, Dr Kevin Clayton-Greene, *Response to Draft report for the review of import conditions for fresh potatoes from New Zealand, Biosecurity Advice 2012/14*, August 2012, p. 1.

Dr Findlay: If we were considering the importation of fresh potatoes for retail sale in Australia, we would update the risk assessment. In this instance, we are considering established measures and taking account of the measures that were established as a result of the 2009 assessment only for potatoes for processing. So there is no new information that changes those measures that were established.⁸

1.12 We share the committee's concerns that the risk management measures proposed by DA biosecurity (including packing house processes, packaging and labelling requirements and transport and quarantine arrangements) show a demonstrated lack of understanding of the potato industry and the real world operation of packing sheds.

1.13 The committee has recommended that before commencing the importation of fresh potatoes from New Zealand a formal Import Risk Analysis be conducted for fresh potatoes, with particular attention paid to:

- the conduct or commissioning of scientific research in relation to possible disease pathways for the Candidatus *Liberibacter solanacearum* pathogen;
- the lack of reliable diagnostic testing for the zebra chip bacteria; and
- the large number of bacteria, fungi, nematodes, arthropods and viruses which are known to occur in New Zealand, and which are of concern to Australian potato producers.

1.14 Whilst we welcome the committee's in depth analysis of the issues and risks associated with the importation of fresh potatoes from New Zealand, we believe a formal Import Risk Analysis will not go far enough to protect Australia's potato industry from Zebra Chip Disease as well as other possible bacteria and viruses. In order to achieve a greater level of protection our whole biosecurity system needs to be rejigged.

1.15 In 2011, Senator Xenophon introduced the *Quarantine Amendment (Disallowing Permits) Bill 2011*, which effectively made Biosecurity Policy Determinations and permits to import, introduce or bring an animal, plant, substance or thing into Australia disallowable instruments. This would mean that the decision to allow (or disallow) imports would be open to much greater scrutiny and transparency than is currently the case. Parliament would have the ultimate say, based on the science and all the available evidence. Strong and effective biosecurity regulations are needed in order to shore up our food security, and ensure that our agricultural sector has a fair go and is able to fight to survive on a level playing field.

8 Dr Vanessa Findlay, Chief Plant Protection Officer, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, *Committee Hansard*, 24 October 2012, p. 46.

Recommendation

1.16 That in addition to the majority report's recommendations, the provisions in the Quarantine Amendment (Disallowing Permits) Bill 2011 be implemented.

Senator Nick Xenophon

Senator John Madigan

