Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Additional Estimates February 2012

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Question: 132

Division/Agency: Biosecurity – Policy Division
Topic: Myrtle Rust
Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator HEFFERNAN asked:

1. Are you aware that major koala habitat has been affected by Myrtle rust? Has anyone investigated the impact on our Koala populations?
2. The state governments are reporting Rhodomyrtus psidioides, Rhodamnia maideniana, Rhodamnia angusttifolia, and Gossia gonociada are all rare and endangered species being devastated by Myrtle Rust. Is the Commonwealth aware of this and what has been the department's response?
3. Has any of the $1.5 million allocated for Myrtle rust management been spent? Provide details on what this money has been spent on.
4. Have there been any strategies developed to monitor the spread of the disease?
5. Has there been any coordinated public information and education strategy?
6. Has there been any coordination of knowledge and expertise of Myrtle rust?
7. Has there been any code of practice for the sale, transport and handling of diseased plants?
8. Has there been any research done on how long the rust can survive on clothing or methods to minimise spread?
9. Has there been any research done on the effectiveness of the chemical controls available to manage the disease?
10. What resources are being applied to monitoring the disease?
11. What can you tell us about the outbreak in Victoria?
12. Are you aware that scientists have discussed replanting native forest species?
13. When the NMG first met to discuss the recent outbreak were members given access to the BRS internal report on Guava rust?
14. Has the Minister visited a Myrtle rust site to experience first hand the impacts of the disease? If so When?
15. Has the head of Biosecurity Australia visited a Myrtle rust site to experience first hand the impacts of the disease? If so when?

Answers

1. Natural infection of the koala food species forest red gum (*Eucalyptus tereticornis*) with Myrtle rust has recently been confirmed at a small number of sites. Based on field observations to date, Biosecurity Queensland has rated this species as relatively tolerant (the lowest susceptibility rating on their 4 point scale). However, as this may change over time, the situation will be monitored.

Question: 132 (continued)

Given that this disease is a relatively recent introduction to Australia, research undertaken to date on the palatability to koalas of myrtle rust infected eucalypt browse, and any potential health impacts that may result, has been limited. Any potential impacts have not yet been determined.

2. The Commonwealth Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities is working with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and other state and territory governments on identifying rare and endangered species which may be susceptible. Strategies for conserving threatened species include the Myrtle rust management plan by the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage which outlines how the rust will be managed on the national park estate in New South Wales, and work through the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation on identifying genetic resistance markers to Myrtle rust.

3. Contracts totalling over $1million for work and services from various providers, including universities and government laboratories, have been initiated and further negotiations are in train for additional work. No money has been passed to contractors as yet. These funds will be disbursed to contractors on the delivery of project milestones through progress payments.

4. The spread of Myrtle rust is being monitored through a combination of community and industry awareness programs being conducted in New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria. Surveillance is also conducted by various officers in government departments during the course of regular duties and research projects which acquire information on spread.

5. A national communication group was established – comprising representatives of government, industry and community groups – with the aim of sharing key information and working to resolve gaps in communications. There are now a number of websites and other communication mediums being used to convey information to a wide range of diverse stakeholders.

   A single source for key information on the disease was established through the National Pest and Diseases Outbreak website, which included links to relevant state websites and information targeting nurseries, home gardeners and bushwalkers. The site also included questions and answers on the disease, and communiqués reflecting the decisions of the National Management Group. The states managing outbreaks of Myrtle rust have provided regular updates through their websites on the status of the incursion in their state. The Queensland government has also issued a regular newsletter on Myrtle rust in Queensland. On the release of the transition to management plan on 18 November 2011, a new site was created (www.myrtlerust.net.au) and is maintained by Plant Health Australia.

Question: 132 (continued)

6. A workshop of national experts on Myrtle rust and similar pathogens, and others who specialise in disease management, diagnostics, surveillance and impacts assessment was held in Brisbane in September 2011. The aim was to create a national register of experts for myrtle rust management to allow for information to be shared and activity coordinated, including research. A scientific advisory group has been established under the Transition to Management program to advise the Transition Management Group on the technical aspects of the management program.

7. States and territories have developed and implemented interstate quarantine regulations to prevent the movement of diseased, untreated material to mitigate spread of the rust beyond know infected areas. Myrtle rust information and practices to mitigate spread and impacts has been communicated through industries including the nursery and garden industry and various other stakeholder groups.

   Industry has its own codes of practice, including Nursery Garden Industry Australia, which has developed and recently updated a Myrtle rust management plan. This plan includes guidelines for the application of fungicides, infected crop management, on-site biosecurity actions as well as advice on interstate movement controls. The plan also includes a declaration that suppliers must complete before distributing potentially susceptible material to show that they have complied with the management plan.

8. Studies have been carried out through the DAFF funded Australian Centre of Excellence on Risk Analysis (ACERA) to investigate the presence of Myrtle rust spores on surfaces including clothing and its viability. This research is being finalised. However, previous studies based on the closely related Guava rust indicate that spore viability can generally range from 2 weeks to 3 months depending on spore type and environmental conditions.

9. Yes. Various fungicide treatments have been investigated and linked with previous projects with Brazil which were funded by the Australian Government and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. While these investigations have been based on the closely related Guava rust, they have been used to inform approaches to Myrtle rust as well as other rust fungi in Australia. The chemicals tested were used during the early stages of the Myrtle rust response and found effective.

   The current Myrtle Rust Transition to Management plan is being implemented as a series of research and development projects, and includes studies relating to the usage and registration of appropriate fungicide treatments for Myrtle rust management. The New South Wales government is currently gathering efficacy data to identify the most effective chemicals for controlling Myrtle rust to support this work.

10. As indicated in the response to question 4, the spread and behaviour of the disease is being monitored through a distributed network of activities ranging from general to specific surveillance carried out by state/territory/local governments, affected industries, non-government organisations and community groups.

Question: 132 (continued)

11. Myrtle rust was first detected in Victoria in December 2011. Up to the end of February 2012 it had been detected at 25 sites in the greater metropolitan area. The rate of detection has slowed recently. The majority of these sites are wholesale and retail nurseries from which infected plants have been removed and destroyed or treated, reinspected and released when no signs of disease are in evidence. The disease is still present to various levels at five nursery gardens and private properties, where it is being controlled by plant removal, pruning and chemical means. The Victorian government is investigating a detection of the disease in a botanic gardens site in the shire of Casey in the south east of the city.

    Land managers, with advice from Victorian government, are pruning the infected plants and applying chemical treatments to control the spread of the disease. Victoria is in the process of transitioning to a management program, which will involve activities aimed at assisting public and private land managers identify and slow the spread of disease.

12. Yes, revegetation strategies are part of an overall myrtle rust management strategy. Host study research currently being conducted on Myrtle rust can be used as an initial guide in selecting potentially less susceptible species for revegetation which will aid in mitigating spread and impact. The transition to management plan focuses on selected areas within this strategy.

13. The only internal BRS report on Guava rust that the department is aware of related to a preliminary cost benefit assessment on the potential impact of the disease on sawn logs. The report was not provided to the NMG as the results were preliminary.

14. The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Senator the Hon Joe Ludwig has visited a number of regions where Myrtle rust has been detected.

15. No, as the head of Biosecurity Australia, which has not been a prescribed agency since July 2009, was not involved in the oversight of the national program to eradicate the disease. Other DAFF staff, including the Chief Plant Protection Officer, travelled with the Consultative Committee on Emergency Plant Pests to the Somersby Plateau on 24 August 2010. Infected properties were not visited at that time due to concerns over the risk of spread that may have occurred. DAFF officers have subsequently observed the disease in northern New South Wales and southern Queensland.

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Additional Estimates February 2012

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Question: 198

Division/Agency: Biosecurity – Policy Division
Topic: Myrtle Rust
Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator COLBECK asked:

1. Is the Government any better briefed on the financial and environmental impacts of Myrtle rust and on the potential impact to forestry than it was in October 2011? Provide details of any additional information on impacts.
2. Provide a copy of the map which shows the distribution of Myrtaceae species in Australia
3. Provide a copy of the map of expected distribution of the disease?
4. Are you aware that major koala Habitat has been affected by Myrtle rust? Has anyone investigated the impact on our Koala populations?
5. The state governments are reporting a number of rare and endangered species are being devastated by Myrtle Rust. (Rhodomyrtus psidioides, Rhodamnia maideniana, Rhodamnia angusttifolia, and Gossia gonociada) by Myrtle Rust. Is the Commonwealth aware of this and what has been the department's response?
6. Has any of the $1.5 million allocated for Myrtle rust management been spent?
7. Have any strategies developed on monitoring the spread of the disease?
8. Has there been any coordinated public information and education strategy?
9. Has there been any coordination of knowledge and expertise of Myrtle rust?

Answer:

1. Information is continuing to be gathered on the host range for Myrtle rust under Australian environmental conditions through on-ground surveillance activities and laboratory-based host testing. As a result, governments and industry groups have a better understanding of potential commercial species that might be susceptible. A number of studies have also been conducted on the impact on particular commercial sectors. Forest & Wood Products Australia, for example, issued a paper on the likely impact of Myrtle rust on the commercial forestry sector.

2. A copy of the map is at **Attached**.

3. A copy of the map based on climate suitability is **Attached**.

Question: 198 (continued)

4. Natural infection of the koala food species forest red gum (*Eucalyptus tereticornis*) with Myrtle rust has recently been confirmed at a small number of sites. Based on field observations to date, Biosecurity Queensland has rated this species as relatively tolerant (the lowest susceptibility rating on their 4 point scale). However, as this may change over time, the situation will be monitored.

   Given that this disease is a relatively recent introduction to Australia, any potential impacts have not yet been determined.

5. The Commonwealth Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities is working with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and other state and territory governments on identifying rare and endangered species which may be susceptible. Strategies for conserving threatened species include the Myrtle rust management plan by the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage which outlines how the rust will be managed on the national park estate in New South Wales, and work through the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation on identifying genetic resistance markers to Myrtle rust.

6. Contracts totalling over $1million for work and services from various providers, including universities and government laboratories, have been initiated and further negotiations are in train for additional work. No money has been passed to contractors as yet. These funds will be disbursed to contractors on the delivery of project milestones through progress payments.

7. The spread of Myrtle rust is being monitored through a combination of community and industry awareness programs being conducted in New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria. Surveillance is also conducted by various officers in government departments during the course of regular duties and research projects which acquire information on spread.

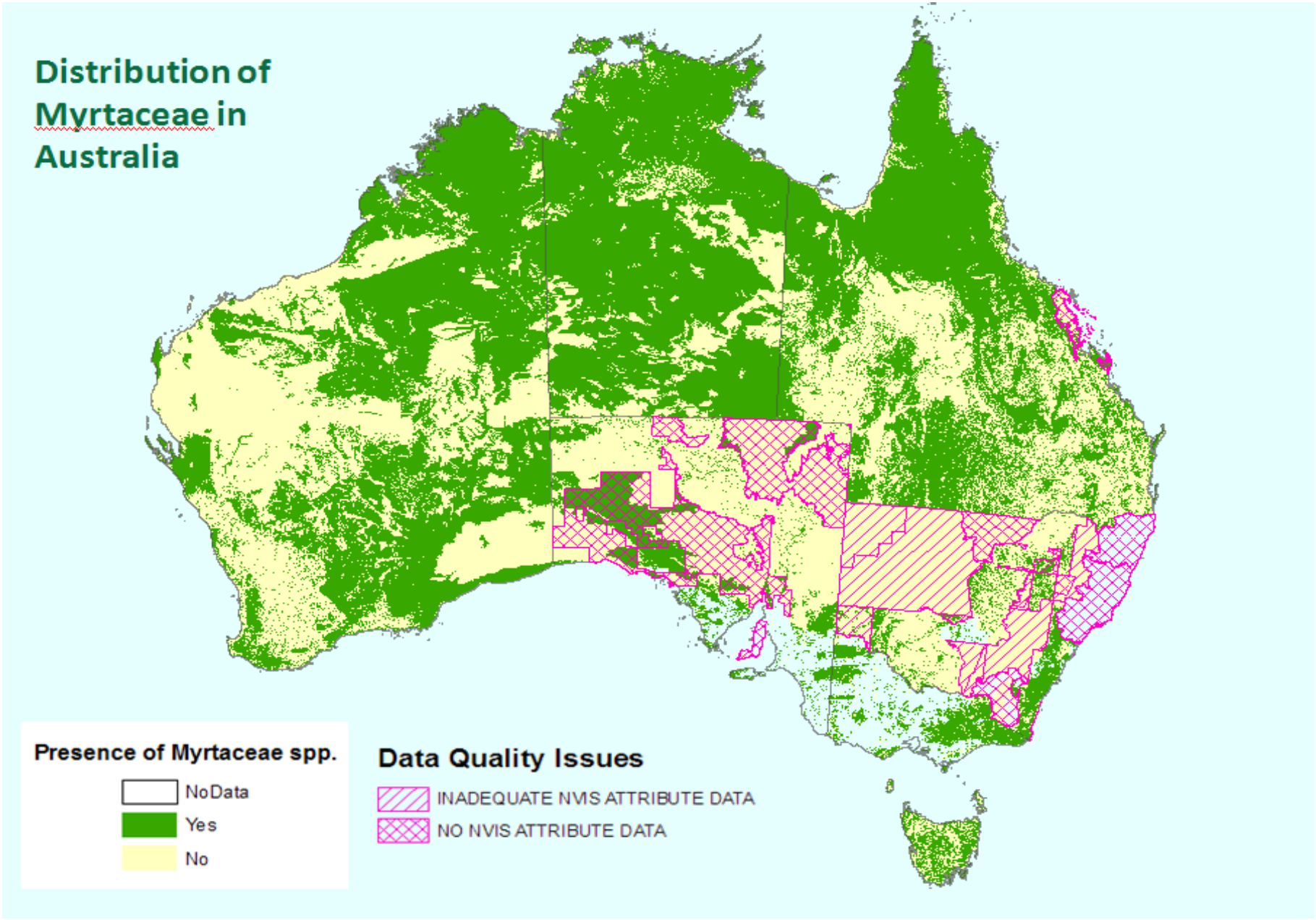
8. A national communication group was established — comprising representatives of government, industry and community groups — with the aim of sharing key information and working to resolve gaps in communications. There are now a number of websites and other communication mediums being used to convey information to a wide range of diverse stakeholders.

Question: 198 (continued)

A single source for key information on the disease was established through the National Pest and Diseases Outbreak website, which included links to relevant state websites and information targeting nurseries, home gardeners and bushwalkers. The site also included questions and answers on the disease, and communiqués reflecting the decisions of the National Management Group. The states managing outbreaks of Myrtle rust have provided regular updates through their websites on the status of the incursion in their state. The Queensland government has also issued a regular newsletter on Myrtle rust in Queensland. All relevant states have held regular open forums on Myrtle rust with industry and community groups. On the release of the transition to management plan on 18 November 2011, a new site was created (www.myrtlerust.net.au) and is maintained by Plant Health Australia.

9. A workshop of national experts on Myrtle rust and similar pathogens, and others who specialise in disease management, diagnostics, surveillance and impacts assessment was held in Brisbane in September 2011. The aim was to create a national register of experts for myrtle rust management to allow for information to be shared and activity coordinated, including research. A scientific advisory group has been established under the Transition to Management program to advise the Transition Management Group on the technical aspects of the management program

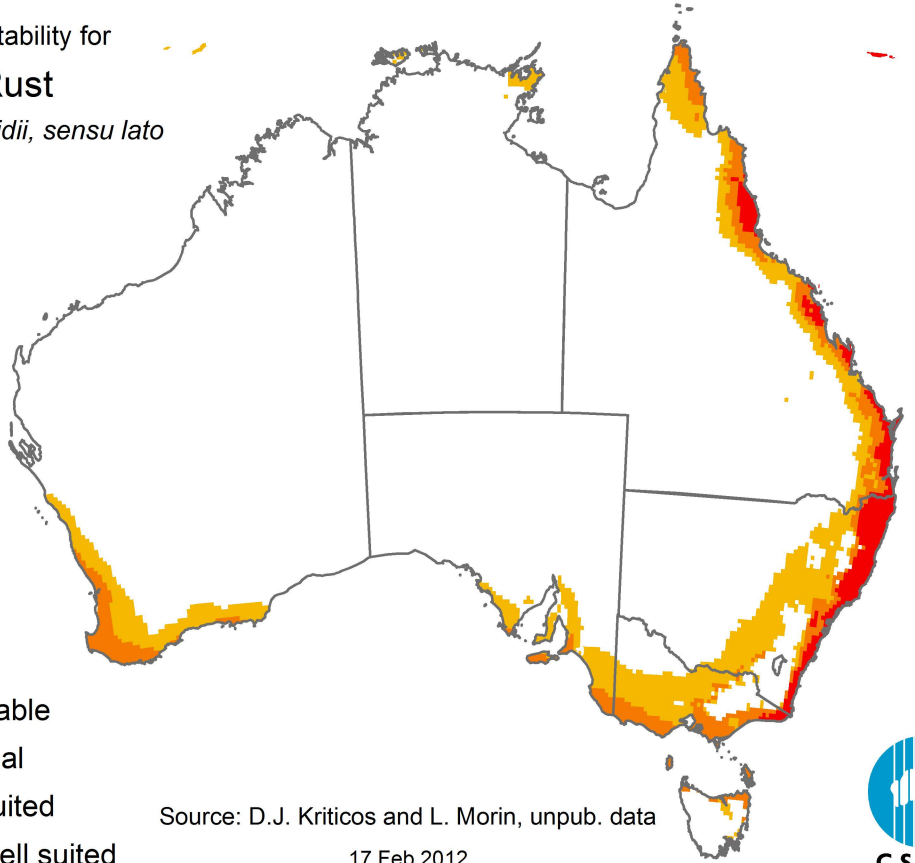
Distribution of Myrtaceae in Australia



Climate suitability for

Myrtle Rust

Puccina psidii, sensu lato



Unsuitable

Marginal

Well suited

Very well suited

Source: D.J. Kriticos and L. Morin, unpub. data

17 Feb 2012

CSIRO

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Additional Estimates February 2012

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Question: 230

Division/Agency: Biosecurity – Policy Division
Topic: National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement
Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator WATERS asked:

1. Please explain the rationale behind the decision-making process of the NEBRA. Why has it been decided that decisions by the National Management Group to implement a national biosecurity incident response are to be by consensus?
2. Does this mean that any one of eight governments represented, or affected industries involved in the National Management Group can veto a response?
3. Does this apply even when particular state or territory governments won't be required to fund the response because they are not likely to be affected by the respective pest or disease?
4. How does this decision-making process affect our national capacity to respond effectively to new environmental incursions?
5. Why is there no role under the NEBRA for the environmental NGO and community sector?
6. Why do 'affected industries' qualify either as voting members or non-voting members, and yet environmental and community sectors are not able to participate?
7. Why are the ENGO and community sector not recognised as affected parties, when they regularly are the land managers and participants in control programs who have to manage these threats if they are not eradicated, and who have a clearly recognised stake in the effective management of environmental threats?
8. How is the exclusion of environmental and community sectors from the NEBRA justified given the recognition in the Beale review report and other processes of the importance of community participation in biosecurity and the clear interest these sectors have in the environmental pests and diseases about which the NEBRA is concerned?
9. Given the clear public interest in effective implementation of the NEBRA, what steps will be taken to ensure the transparency and public accountability of decision-making?
10. Will the government make a commitment to publish all risk assessments, technical feasibility analyses, cost-benefit analyses, and national biosecurity incident response plans that are the basis of decision-making in a timely fashion? Please advise the Government's position in relation to each document/ assessment type listed. If timely publication is not intended please advise why not.
11. Despite the pivotal place of the precautionary principle in environmental decision-making, there is no mention of the principle in the NEBRA and the decision-making process seems antithetical to that principle.
12. Given the recognition by the Government of the importance of the precautionary principle in environmental decision-making, please advise how it will be implemented in decision-making about biosecurity incursions.
13. How is the NEBRA framework, particularly the requirement for consensus which creates the potential for any one party, including an industry body, to veto a response, consistent taking a precautionary approach?

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Additional Estimates February 2012

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Question: 230 (continued)

Answer:

1. Two levels of national bodies are responsible for managing national aspects of responses to pest or disease outbreaks under the National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement (NEBRA) – including the National Biosecurity Management Group (NBMG) and the National Biosecurity Management Consultative Committee (NBMCC).

   The NBMG is the body responsible for key decisions in the event of a pest or disease response. The NBMG is the decision making body, supported by a technical advisory body – the NBMCC.

   The precedent of consensus decision making is consistent with similar instruments.

2-3. Parties involved in the cost-sharing associated with a national biosecurity incident response have the right to participate (by voting) in related NBMG determinations.

4. The NEBRA presents a significant improvement in the capacity for Australian Governments to make decisions about, respond to and manage environmental biosecurity incursions.

5-9. Questions 5 to 9 appear to assume that the NEBRA is something other than a government agreement. This is not correct. Voting members are those that are parties to the agreement. The agreement allows for one representative from each 'private beneficiary' to be a voting member of the NBMG if the chair determines that it is appropriate and if the 'private beneficiary' would ultimately be contributing to the financial cost of the national biosecurity incident response. A private beneficiary could be a non-government organisation.

   The NEBRA is an agreement between governments. The parties referred to in the NEBRA are the Commonwealth, state and territory governments. Affected parties are the parties (Commonwealth, state and territory parties) that are, or may be affected by an outbreak of a pest or disease.

   The NEBRA prescribes principles of accountability and transparency through:
   - clear roles and responsibilities
   - clear procedures for decision making and the exercise of power
   - auditing at the request of the National Biosecurity Committee or NBMG.

   Decisions made by NBMG will be reported to the Primary Industries Standing Committee and Standing Council on Primary Industries, as appropriate. As with responses to incursions covered by the EPPRD and EADRA, the NBMG will also issue regular public Communiqués on decisions and progress for particular outbreaks.

Question: 230 (continued)

10-13. NBMG and NBMCC deliberations and its associated documents such as response plans are usually treated as confidential to protect:

- the identity and details of individuals directly affected by the pest or disease outbreak
- commercial-in-confidence information that may be acquired in a response
- the integrity of the arrangements
- the integrity of international reporting and market access activities.

Associated technical reports may be publicly released.

The purpose of the NEBRA is to ensure timely responses to outbreaks that could significantly impact nationally important/ecologically valuable species or places. Although the precautionary principle in environmental decision making is not stated in the NEBRA, the agreement has provision for consideration of pests and diseases of unknown or uncertain origin or where there is a potential threat to an area and contains details of national significance criteria under Schedule 3.