

Citrus Canker Outbreak

I and 20 3rd year Bachelor of Environmental Management (University of Queensland-Gatton) students visited Emerald as part of the Northern & Tropical Tour to Central and North Queensland in June-July, 2005. We met with Mr Gary Pigeon, the Citrus Canker Coordinator on Thursday 30th June at the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries office in Emerald. We were then taken on a tour of the canker affected sites and also to the Rifle range site where native citrus plants will be killed to reduce and/or eliminate the canker from the district.

The information given to me and the students was very useful in helping us understand the current situation in Emerald regarding the canker outbreak and the measures that have been put in place to eradicate it.

Our group was very impressed with Garry Pigeon. He (and other colleagues) had devised a plan to eradicate the canker bacterium. However, we became concerned with the inability of governments to deal with the economic impact, the social implications and the non-scientific information that was being used to deal with an environmental issue. I will discuss these briefly.

Economic impact. From our brief visit, there seems to be a huge economic impact on a small number of private farms, one large corporate farm and a general impact on the town's operation and the wider community. At the time of our visit there was no compensation being considered by either state or federal governments. Emerald is a thriving economic rural, regional community reliant on horticulture crops (e.g. vines and citrus fruits) as well as grazing, cropping and mines. The three family affected farms do not seem to be implicated in the infections being present on their farms but nonetheless will have all their income-producing citrus trees killed and burned. This does seem to be fair in the Australian system.

On recent television programs rural and regional towns are gradually declining due to a number of reasons. The economic effect of losing at least three (and perhaps more if the outbreak is not eliminated) highly productive farms will be major in Emerald. I do not think state and federal governments should let this occur when it is their power to stop it.

I understand both governments are contributing to the funding of control and eradication of the outbreak. A recent \$11 million fund to fight the canker contains some compensation payments to those affected by the outbreak. However, I do not consider that this level of funding is suitable. Many of the federal government aid packages require high levels of administration to get the aid that some of the affected farmers may not even receive aid due to "bureaucracy".

Social implications. The canker outbreak, as reported in the press, may be having a negative affect on tourism to the local area. The outbreak is definitely affecting the trafficking of large trucks to and from the area as the owners do not want their trucks to

be contaminated. This has a negative effect on the social wellbeing of the town and district. The social implications of such and outbreak and the gradual uncovering of increasing numbers of infected farms, need studying. It seems to me that there has been a negative effect created by state and federal governments by them not financially supporting the re-establishment of the productive farms and minimising the impact of the canker.

Non-scientific decision-making. From the information presented to our university tour group, non-scientific information has been used in the initial stages of 'fighting' the canker outbreak. For example, 600 metre diameter zones were made around affected trees. Within these zones all citrus trees were killed and burned. As the bacterium transfers by wind and water, the 600 metre zones were not effective. These zones also created problems for the farmer when trying to manage the last remaining trees occurring on the farm which lay outside the zones. It was uneconomic to care for them and make any money from the produce.

We were informed that recently (July, 2005) that the recommendations from the Canker Control Coordinator and his team were agreed to by the relevant Federal Department. That is, that 600 m diameter zones be deleted and that all citrus trees on the infected farm be killed and burned. This action seems to be working as there is no regeneration of infected trees which have been cleared and burned. It also highlights the way ineffective decisions are made by people located far from the problem.

In future, use science to inform the policy makers not hearsay and anecdotal information.

Summary. In summary, I consider that Mr Pigeon and his team are doing an excellent job in dealing with this issue. They have based their eradication decisions on reliable scientific information, rather than other types of information. Mr Pigeon is committed to working through the issue until its completion, rather than spend some time dealing with it and then returning to his normal job. He should be congratulated for this attitude. Finally, both state and federal governments should contribute 50% each to the re-establishment of highly efficient and productive farms because it is in the regional and national interest.

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