



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

SENATE

RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT
LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

Reference: Citrus canker outbreak

WEDNESDAY, 27 JULY 2005

BRISBANE

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

INTERNET

The Proof and Official Hansard transcripts of Senate committee hearings, some House of Representatives committee hearings and some joint committee hearings are available on the Internet. Some House of Representatives committees and some joint committees make available only Official Hansard transcripts.

The Internet address is: **<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>**

To search the parliamentary database, go to:
<http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au>

SENATE
RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT LEGISLATION COMMITTEE
Wednesday, 27 July 2005

Members: Senator Heffernan (*Chair*) and Senators Ferris, McEwen, McGauran, Milne and Sterle

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Allison, Bartlett, Mark Bishop, Boswell, Brown, George Campbell, Carr, Chapman, Coonan, Crossin, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Hogg, Hutchins, Lightfoot, Ludwig, Lundy, Sandy Macdonald, Mackay, Mason, Nettle, O'Brien, Payne, Robert Ray, Santoro, Stephens, Watson and Webber

Senators in attendance: Senators Ferris, Heffernan, McEwen, McGauran, Milne, O'Brien and Sterle

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's administration of the citrus canker invasion with particular reference to:

- 1) AQIS' response to the allegations of illegal importation of plant material;
- 2) The adoption of the quarantine protocols and management of the emergency response;
- 3) Cooperation between the Commonwealth and States, including funding issues;
- 4) The impact of the incursion on the Australian citrus industry;
- 5) Prevention and management of future incursions; and
- 6) Other related matters.

WITNESSES

| | |
|--|----------|
| MILLERS, Mr Gerard, Private capacity..... | 1 |
| RICHARDS, Mr Greg, Private capacity..... | 1 |

Committee met at 3.50 pm**MILLERS, Mr Gerard, Private capacity****RICHARDS, Mr Greg, Private capacity**

CHAIR (Senator Heffernan)—I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee. The committee is hearing evidence on a committee of inquiry into the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's administration of the citrus canker outbreak. I welcome everyone here today.

Before the committee starts taking evidence, I place on record that all witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to submissions made to the committee and evidence given. I remind witnesses that parliamentary privilege does not extend to statements repeated outside the committee's proceedings. Any act by any person which may disadvantage a witness on account of evidence given by him or her before the Senate committee is a breach of privilege.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, the committee may agree to take evidence confidentially. If the committee takes confidential evidence, it may still publish or present to the Senate all of that evidence at a later date. The Senate also has the power to order production and/or publication of confidential evidence. Before taking such action, the committee would consult the person whose evidence the committee is considering publishing.

I also draw to your attention the continuing resolution relating to the claims of commercial confidentiality. Under the resolution, a claim to withhold information on the basis that it is commercial-in-confidence can only be made by a minister and must include a statement setting out the basis for the claim, including a statement of any commercial harm that may result from the disclosure of the information. Finally, it is the intention of the committee to seek the facts relating to the issue and not to apportion blame in this inquiry. Would you like to make an opening statement? Then we will ask you some questions.

Audiovisual presentation

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

Mr Richards—Is that just in relation to what my job was?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Richards—I was a budder.

CHAIR—Did you work in the nursery?

Mr Richards—Yes, in the nursery at Evergreen Farms.

CHAIR—What was your role there?

Mr Richards—Mostly, it was just to put the buds on the trees. They would buy them in through some scheme for citrus. That was our job. We did some tractor driving, if there was no work in the nursery.

CHAIR—You were a budder?

Mr Richards—Yes, one of them.

CHAIR—When did you start that work?

Mr Richards—We went up there sometime in the middle of 2000—it is going back a while.

CHAIR—When did you leave?

Mr Richards—I left probably sometime in the middle of 2002.

CHAIR—Did you leave voluntarily or were you asked to leave?

Mr Richards—I left voluntarily.

CHAIR—Were you there the day AQIS turned up at the farm?

Mr Richards—No. I had left before that.

CHAIR—Gerard, I believe your role at the farm was similar to Greg's.

Mr Millers—My main role up there was as a budder and I did some maintenance around the place. That was pretty much it. I spent most of my time in the nursery. That sums it up in a nutshell.

CHAIR—When did you start work there, Gerard?

Mr Millers—Around June 2000 was when I started working for them. I was there for about six months.

CHAIR—When did you finish?

Mr Millers—December 2000.

CHAIR—Were you there when AQIS turned up?

Mr Millers—No, I was not there when they turned up.

CHAIR—The committee is inquiring into a citrus canker outbreak and allegations that there may have been some inappropriate importations of bud wood. In relation to the bud wood, was some of that different to what you would describe as normal bud wood?

Mr Millers—Yes, the presentation was different.

CHAIR—Can you remember when that was?

Mr Richards—No, I could not remember a date.

CHAIR—How would you describe the bud wood that was different? It has been described as different to the normal bud wood that would be associated with your nursery work.

Mr Richards—What I found different was that it was in much shorter lengths.

Mr Millers—It was wrapped in cloth, wasn't it?

Mr Richards—Yes, it was wrapped up in a tea towel and there was leaf material in it, whereas the normal stuff that we got from the scheme or that we have used in other places came in a plastic bag with a tag saying what it was with a rough count of how many buds were in that bag.

CHAIR—Did it appear to you that the bud wood you were transplanting did not look the same as traditional bud wood? We have heard evidence that it may have been contaminated with tea-leaves. Was that evident to you?

Mr Millers—Yes, it had a leaf material in it. I had never received bud wood presented in that way before. The normal bud wood I have ever used has generally come in a sealed plastic bag.

CHAIR—Yes, and I suppose it would have a certain shelf life. With your experience in the nursery, was that bud wood that we are referring to now, the extraordinary-looking bud wood, getting towards the later part of its bud wood life? Was it old or less fresh?

Mr Millers—Yes, it was not overly sappy.

Mr Richards—From memory, it was older wood—looking at the actual buds.

CHAIR—Were there any rumours at the time that it might have been an importation?

Mr Richards—No; definitely not.

CHAIR—It looked different, but there was no discussion of where it may have come from et cetera?

Mr Richards—No, I did not see anything. We just thought it was another variety or maybe something they got from another importer or something like that at the time that I—

CHAIR—Could I just get away from the bud wood for a moment. You blokes were gone from your employment there by the time AQIS quarantined the farm—is that right?

Mr Millers—Yes.

CHAIR—And the same applies to you, Greg?

Mr Richards—No, I went away and came back. When I came back they had all the signs up about quarantine. But other than that—

CHAIR—When you went away, were you still employed but on holidays or leave or something?

Mr Richards—No, I left and came back.

CHAIR—Thanks very much.

Senator FERRIS—You have already said that the material that you were using smelled of tea and that there were tea-leaves on it. Can I ask you to recall the length of it? We have had evidence previously that suggested that this bud wood was of a smaller size than the bud wood that had previously been used on the farm; in fact, it was significantly shorter than other bud wood that had been used. Do you recall the size of the pieces of wood?

Mr Millers—Yes, that is correct. It was somewhere between four to six inches long and of an even sort of cut.

Senator FERRIS—What would be the normal length?

Mr Millers—It is generally longer, but you do get tinier, shorter, thinner pieces with the tips of the wood. Normally they would be a bit longer and have more buds per stick, so to speak.

Mr Richards—Yes, they were probably about a third of the size or something.

Senator FERRIS—So it was a third of the size, it smelled of tea and it had tea-leaves on it. Did you ask in your minds why this might be?

Mr Millers—I would not have said it had tea-leaves. It had a leaf material. I do not know what tea-leaves look like. But, yes, it had a smell of tannin and a moisture that would be in a tea towel. It smelled something like tea. I could not tell you whether it was or was not tea.

Senator FERRIS—But did it seem curious to you that it was quite dramatically different in its size, type, freshness and odour from other material that you had used?

Mr Millers—You could say that, but I do not know what is done differently in different cultures around the world. That is how it was presented. If they picked the tea and that is what it is being presented as, I could not tell you.

Mr Richards—It was still bud wood and more or less the same; it was just shorter, more or less.

Senator FERRIS—You have already told us that it was the first time you have had bud wood that had leaf matter on it and smelled of tea.

Mr Richards—Yes, that is correct.

Senator FERRIS—Did you talk to any other workers on the farm about this in general conversation?

Mr Richards—I cannot remember back then, but we may have, yes—whether they got it from another farm or whether it was a special or rare breed or something. I do not know.

Senator FERRIS—Are you aware of the evidence that Mr Gillies has given to this committee in relation to this bud wood and the source of it?

Mr Millers—No.

Mr Richards—No.

Senator FERRIS—It might be useful for the secretariat to let you have a look at Mr Gillies's statement and also his responses in the *Hansard* to our questions. It might also help you if you looked at Mr Ienco's material. Do you know those two people?

Mr Richards—I think he was in charge of the grapes.

Mr Millers—I can't think of him.

Mr Richards—Yes, Gerard was not there. I think Gerard left before that; Fred was there, I think.

Senator FERRIS—Perhaps if the secretariat sends you that *Hansard* material, and you have a chance to look at it, something else might come back to you. I know it was a long time ago, but this is a very serious matter.

CHAIR—I have a question for Greg. This relates to your leaving the job and coming back. We had evidence that a certain portion of the citrus orchard was sprayed at three o'clock in the morning with Roundup. I have to say, as an old worn-out farmer, this was a quite extraordinary practice. It is an extraordinary way to conduct yourself on a citrus farm. Did you hear talk about that when you went back there?

Mr Richards—There was talk of a patch that died. I never knew it was Roundup or anything like that. It was just that it had died.

CHAIR—Did you hear about any grapevines being dug up in a hurry and being transplanted or taken to the tip and destroyed—any of that sort of talk?

Mr Richards—No, I did not hear that.

CHAIR—Were you ever interviewed formally at the time or at any time by DPI, AQIS or anyone?

Mr Richards—No. They did ring me. In the latest case that would have been maybe 12 months ago. They were up there. They just rang me and said they might get back to me.

CHAIR—Who were they? Was that AQIS or the DPI?

Mr Richards—DPI.

Senator O'BRIEN—Greg and Gerard, I have a couple of brief questions. Who brought this shorter bud wood to you? Did you just find it in the nursery, or did someone bring it to you?

Mr Millers—I am not sure of that. I think Wayne Gillies brought the first lot. After that we would go and get it from where it was kept.

Senator O'BRIEN—Where was it kept?

Mr Millers—In the main residence on the farm.

Senator O'BRIEN—Is that the place that was known as the White House?

Mr Millers—That is correct.

CHAIR—Would that be in the fridge?

Mr Millers—Yes, it was.

Senator O'BRIEN—So this different bud wood was in the fridge in the main residence on the property?

Mr Millers—That is correct.

Senator O'BRIEN—And you personally collected it from that fridge?

Mr Millers—At times, yes.

CHAIR—So how did you know which lot to collect? Was there a label on it to say, 'This lot for you this morning, Greg'?

Mr Richards—I never actually got the wood from over there. Gerard got it.

CHAIR—Sorry, that is a question for Gerard.

Mr Millers—No. Wayne Gillies actually showed me the first time where to get it. Then, as to any other time that I had to go for it, they just told me it would be kept in the fridge. I would have to get an office staff lady to go with me to the residence. Then the house lady would let me in the house. She would just point to the fridge, I would go to the fridge, get it and off I would go.

CHAIR—Was Aida the name of the lady who used to do that?

Mr Millers—The house lady?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Millers—I think it was.

Senator O'BRIEN—How much of this bud wood did you take from this particular fridge?

Mr Millers—All up or at any one time?

Senator O'BRIEN—Overall.

Mr Millers—Overall there would have only been five or six bags.

Senator O'BRIEN—How many pieces, roughly, to a bag?

Mr Millers—Maybe 15 to 20 sticks.

Senator O'BRIEN—Was the fridge in the main house the usual place for you to get your bud wood?

Mr Millers—No.

Senator O'BRIEN—Did anyone ever explain to you why this particular bud wood was in the fridge in the main house?

Mr Millers—No.

Senator O'BRIEN—Did you ever ask?

Mr Millers—No. We were told nothing of it. We were not given a variety name or anything to put down for it. We were only ever told to keep it separate.

Senator O'BRIEN—As for the more conventional bud wood, you were well aware of the variety that you were working with, weren't you?

Mr Millers—That is correct.

Senator O'BRIEN—So only these five or six batches in the refrigerator in the main house were unlabelled.

Mr Millers—That is correct.

Senator MILNE—I just wanted to move on a bit from the bud wood from 2000 to the canker outbreak in 2004. My understanding—and I would like to be corrected if this is wrong—is that, where bud wood was brought in in 2000 and then grafted on to trees or whatever, those trees would still have been there in 2004 and therefore the citrus canker outbreak in 2004 could, if that was the case, have been directly linked to the 2000-01 episode. Is that the case? Is that how it works? The bud wood is grafted on to a tree and then the tree is there four years later and the citrus canker outbreak could be transferred in that way.

Mr Millers—I do not know a lot about canker, but, yes, if everything went all right, one would have thought that, yes.

Senator MILNE—I am interested in the evidence that was given by Mr Price previously in this regard, especially in your work in the nursery, because it was said that when AQIS came through people in the nursery were told to cut off the imperial 1A stock straightaway, that the labels were removed and some of the trees that I am talking about now—some of this bud wood that had been grafted on—were mixed up with other trees that would then have been planted out effectively all over the farm. Is that the case?

CHAIR—Can I just interrupt as chairman for a second, Senator Milne. You understand these people were not at the nursery when all this took place.

Senator MILNE—Yes, but one of them said he came back and was working in the nursery at the time that AQIS came through.

Mr Richards—No. I was not there when AQIS came through. I came in afterwards. By that time it all would have gone. There was actually no DPI there.

Senator MILNE—I am sorry. I knew one of you had not. I thought the other one had come back to work there later. If I can just finish that by asking: have you heard any discussion or any talk about that issue of removing the labels at the time that AQIS came through so that that stock was all mixed in together and theoretically could have been spread all round the farm?

Mr Richards—No, I have not heard that one. When I returned the trees were not there, the ones that we had budded. I do not know where they went.

Senator STERLE—Gerard, when you went back to the house to collect the bud wood from the fridge, I believe it was on a number of occasions—is that correct?

Mr Millers—Yes, it would have been on a few occasions.

Senator STERLE—When you first went there, did it ever coincide with the arrival of Philip Cea, the owner of the property?

Mr Millers—To be honest, I could not really answer that, no. I cannot remember anything that sticks out as coinciding with his return or not, no.

CHAIR—Thanks very much, Greg and Gerard. Is there anything further that you would like to add?

Mr Richards—No, that is probably about it, I suppose, from what I can remember.

Mr Millers—I do not think I could add anything. In my six months, all I had done was more or less to bud trees. That was it. As for what happened with AQIS when they arrived, I do not know.

CHAIR—Greg, when you came back and worked there the second time, how long did you work there for?

Mr Richards—It might have only been about six weeks.

CHAIR—And, roughly, when might that have been?

Mr Richards—It would have been at the end of 2002.

CHAIR—The raid occurred in 2001, so by that time there had been a raid and some material had been transferred to Eastern Creek in Sydney. Did you ever hear any follow-up about what happened to the stuff that was sent there as a consequence of the AQIS raid?

Mr Richards—No, I know nothing of that.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We are grateful for your evidence.

Committee adjourned at 4.20 pm

