

AQIS Review

Background

I would like to comment on the AQIS Biosecurity review. I have 35 years professional experience as an entomologist and insect taxonomist with the Departments of Primary Industry in NSW and NT, the Curator of Entomology at the NT Museum (MAGNT), and as Regional Quarantine Entomologist with the Operational Science Programme (OSP) in NSW and NT. I also spent 2 years with AQIS IT administering the Taxa Table which is the taxonomic reference table used by the NAQS and Incidents databases. Currently I have a 3-month non-ongoing contract acting as Regional Entomologist for the (OSP) in the NT.

I am required to point out that my comments are personal observations.

Core Business

The core objective of AQIS is to protect Australia from exotic pests and diseases, and the core functions are the detection and identification of these found on/in of incoming goods and travellers, and to communication and action this data as appropriate. There would be no quarantine service and no AQIS if we did not do this, and all other objectives and functions are secondary to this.

I believe the Department/Organisation has forgotten this because of its size and a lack of understanding of the important but technical nature of this, especially scientific jargon. The voice of science and particularly OSP has become diluted by all the other opinions in AQIS, and particularly evident with the development of the Incidents and NAQS databases.

The problem of not being heard is made worse because AQIS is not a separate department of its own, does not have direct links to the Minister, and its funding is not protected from other parts of DAFF.

There is also a need for programme managers to be experienced in the fields they manage. They need personal experience and a good understanding of problems and other issues to make informed decisions. This requires years of experience, and the rotating of managers every 2 years is counterproductive and not an efficient use of expertise. Uninformed decisions place AQIS at risk.

Similarly, if one programme provides uninformed information to another, this also puts AQIS at risk. This may be reduced if the number of programmes were reduced, for example cargo, seaports, airports and mail programmes are operationally similar. Do they need separate structures and managers?

Funding levels

OSP scientists are the people that know what is entering and leaving Australia. They are constantly observing and researching the pests and diseases that are threatening

this country, and as such are arguably the most informed group of people within AQIS on the organisms threatening and potentially threatening Australia. They are over-worked, under staffed and the programme is under funded. If you accept the tenet that OSP is one of the few core functions of AQIS, then the programme is grossly under staffed and funded.

The lack of books and other scientific literature is a further issue, as is training especially with the decreasing number of taxonomists. These issues are not restricted to OSP.

Moral

The moral is low within AQIS. People are scared to do things because they are scared of management accusing them of inappropriate behaviour. This is not just because “butt protecting” has become contagious from the equine influenza problem, but because of the way staff are treated. The statement that AQIS cares for staff is generally not believed, and the way staff was recently treated over “inappropriate” material on computers was appalling. While I don’t know the details of why this happened, marching people off the premises is not nice, and the sacking of large numbers of experienced staff is counterproductive at the very least. This type of action and the secrecy surrounding it has changed staff attitudes for the worse.

Part of the moral problem is also due to the increasing non-core and unproductive business that is being placed on already overworked staff. There is too much management, too much bureaucracy, too much arguing with the computer network including logging on every time I walk to the printer, and too much “ticking the boxes” rather than any concern over the accuracy of those “ticks”. The development but disfunctionality of the new NAQS and Incidents databases is also a contributing factor here.

Whilst not strictly a moral issue, the current uncertainty of whether post barrier detection responsibility will rest with AQIS or State and Territory Governments is a concern. This needs clear direction to prevent loopholes in quarantine procedures and effectiveness. AQIS is seen as the body responsible for quarantine, and the arrival of a sugarcane pest may be dealt with less favourably in the NT which does not grow this crop, than if it were in Queensland where it is a major crop. If the control were to be left to the individual states/territories there is likely to be inconsistencies, and ultimately criticism of AQIS. This concerns staff and affects moral.

The recent successes in the NT with fruitfly and blackstriped mussel invasions have been more due to good luck and timing than with preparedness and available resources and expertise.

Synergies

On a more constructive note, I see synergies between other scientists in AQIS and DAFF that could be exploited to provide better use of resources and reduce the possibility of conflicting information being provided by different work groups within the organisation. Included here are NAQS as well as those involved with Biosecurity and Market Access etc. From a scientific view there is much overlap in functions but little overlap in knowledge sharing. It makes more sense a single scientific programme which would include OSP and NAQS to undertake and provide ALL the

science to other groups, and these other groups then deal with the politics, economics and legal issues.

The feasibility of this should be examined. The role of NAQS should also be examined. It may be better use of time for the programme to spend more time in the field, and other staff to do the identifications. The target list needs to better reflect potential risks.

Currently there is the potential of different work groups expressing differing and conflicting on the same issue. This potentially threatens the credibility of AQIS, and is one reason why DAFF should use a single database, or linked databases that have separate but overlapping data fields. It is also inefficient.

If such a programme were to be established, I would envisage it as being mostly regionalised, so that people working on the importation of apples from New Zealand would be done out of Sydney regional office if that was the point of entry for most NZ apples. Staff numbers would be adjusted and the manager be selected from one of the staff perhaps on a rotating basis. Staff would include scientists from BA etc and the programme named accordingly. The numbers of managers could be reduced and their would be better exchange of knowledge. This challenges current management streams.

I have worked under six different OSP managers. From an operational point of view, most were unable to help me do my job, and I suspect that one or two did not understand what I did. However, I do admit that I am not fully aware of the manager's function, I think he/she also needs to be useful to me. My point here is that guidance and information is really provided laterally from interstate colleagues rather than from managers.

Retention of knowledge

The danger here is also the retention of scientific knowledge. If one or two key Quarantine Entomologists for example were to leave AQIS or OSP, the system would collapse, and knowledge would have to be re-learnt (if this were possible). I saw this happen between 1993 and 1999 during which I was not involved with AQIS. A large amount of expertise disappeared on such topics as fumigation, and taxonomy. The non-retention of scientific knowledge is a threat to Australian quarantine.

Perhaps the easiest way to overcome this is increase the number of technical training programmes on technical issues and development of more technical training/reference booklets with good illustrations etc. This could be outsourced to particular experts in various fields.

Whilst ICON and Work Instructions are essential, there is too much data to include every possibility, and there is too little information on occasions to make informed decisions. Circumstances also vary between regions because of differing locations, environments, hazards etc. As a result, it may be more productive to place more emphasis on regions rather than on centralising expertise in Canberra and thus further away from operational activities.

Databases

The current NAQS and Incidents databases are a good idea, but after at least 8 years of development, they still do not fully work. As an OSP scientist I still cannot query the Incidents Database for a list of insects previously detected for a particular commodity. In the previous system I could.

These databases were set up and written by AQIS IT to their priorities, not its clients'. This has wasted a lot of time and money. Further, data from the database that preceded Incidents was not transferred to the new database. This was a serious loss of available corporate knowledge.

On the other hand, this database is not fully utilised. It contains a catalogue function to record literature such as reference books and scientific keys. This would be extremely useful and convenient to all OSP scientists etc and would save time to anyone who does literature searches whether a scientist or not (providing access was made available).

There should be a review of all AQIS software programmes with the view of having a single linked database, to eliminate discrepancies, to confirm full functionality and to confirm they meet all clients expectations.

Communication

Communication is one of AQIS's core functions. It is vital within the Organisation, but there is not enough, particularly with training and general activities.

There is also a requirement that AQIS scientists communicate with colleagues outside the Organisation. This is partially due to a lack of some disciplines within AQIS (eg marine biologists, botanists, insect and other taxonomists) or limited access to such experts. This necessitates involvement with other agencies and departments, thus placing restrictions on how much information can be released. Whilst Freedom of Information and protocols are important, I think AQIS is becoming too restrictive and secretive at the expense of science and quarantine objectives.

Recommendations

1. AQIS needs to be a separate, stand alone Department to minimise threats to its objectives and funding
2. AQIS needs to fully staff and fund core groups
3. AQIS needs to eliminate duplication of functions and services that could cause embarrassment by simultaneously providing conflicting information
4. AQIS needs to review all inhouse software and consider using a single database to ensure its suitability and to prevent conflicting data
5. AQIS should review its programming structure to reduce the number of programmes and management structures
6. Programme managers to be experienced in the fields they manage
7. AQIS should consider forming a single science programme to provide all scientific data
8. AQIS should review all its science functions (and other functions) to examine suitability and range of functions to ensure that they meet the requirements of the Organisations objectives

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