

Additional Information Requested by Andrew Inglis

References that may provide the panel with valuable insights into AQIS operations

Shelved reports that reportedly detail many weaknesses and issues:

Surrounding Post Entry Plant Quarantine in Australia –

“Review of Medium Risk Nursery Stock Operational Procedures”, Plant Quarantine Group. July 2004- June 2005” by N. Grant, M. Robbins and M. Allan. Commissioned by AQIS Plant Programs.

Surrounding the culture of AQIS –

A report by Mick Palmer on an ‘Investigation into AQIS’ Culture’.

Additional Issues

Issue:

Currently there are no Standard Operating Procedures or manual detailing AQIS policy for isolating or segregating imported plants undergoing post entry quarantine.

Solution:

A management protocol identifying alternate host species and modes of transmission of quarantinable diseases should be available to all high risk PEQ facility managers to ensure risks are managed appropriately. A staged project managed by Biosecurity Australia to at first provide policies for the main commercial high risk species imported, and later to address other high risk species.

Issue:

Reluctance of AQIS plant programs managers to resolve demonstrated flaws in current import arrangements. Eg. Oversized nursery stock imports that provide an entry pathway to internal feeding insects; inconsistencies in policies allowing entry to some species in tissue cultures where a virus risk exists; release of virus-infected plants without a complete assessment of exactly what diseases they are carrying; and, failure to implement a nationally consistent policy for the application of nematicide treatments.

Solution:

The core of this issue revolves around middle management culture in the Plant Programs area in Canberra, containing issues so they do not escalate to involve senior management.

A publicly available ‘Register of Plant Import Issues’, similar to the Biosecurity Australia ‘Current Risk Analyses’ webpages would provide transparency and accountability for the decisions that are currently made without full and complete examination of the risks.

Oversized nursery stock:

AQIS still permit imports of large plants into Australia, despite demonstrated interceptions of exotic arthropod species that successfully evade fumigation treatments by concealing themselves in large plants. This situation provides an avenue for potentially serious pest species to enter the country.

Solution:

Australia should adopt a policy similar to the US for these imports. The USDA now restricts plant imports based on their size. Some species are now totally prohibited into the US because of the risks that they present as hosts of internal feeding insects.

Issue:

Currently, there is no specific specification for 'High Risk' post entry quarantine facilities. The network of high risk facilities needs only meet the same specification for medium risk (ornamentals, orchids, etc) facilities.

Solution:

A review into post entry facility standards is required that encompasses all of the factors involved, eg. quarantine risks, greenhouse design (cooling, ventilation) and running costs.

Issue:

There are many technical issues surrounding import activities that require some research to clarify the best policy that should be applied.

Solution:

AQIS operational scientists should be involved in prioritising research projects that have relevance to current policy. In addition to projects conducted by the CRC for Biosecurity, funding should be made available to fund research into high priority issues identified by AQIS scientists.

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Solution:

High Risk PEQ facilities need to be located near teams of qualified plant pathologists to undertake inspections and diagnostic tests. These pathologists need to have relevant experience and be independent of the industry that is being serviced to prevent a conflict of interest.

The parochialism of State borders needs to be overcome to ensure that the PEQ network is as cost effective as it can be. The Eagle Farm "High Risk" PEQ facility currently provides services to clients in northern Queensland and New South Wales who are greater than 1000 km from Brisbane, clients that have never visited Eagle Farm. The service works well. Therefore, one scenario for southern Australia is to have 1 or 2 "High Risk" PEQ centres providing services to clients, rather than having a PEQ Centre in each State (NSW, Victoria, SA, Tasmania). A PEQ Centre may be required in Perth, but I am not familiar with the volume of "High Risk" material being imported for the west. However, it should be noted that seed or plants once released from post-entry plant quarantine can easily be transported to destinations within Australia without undue suffering to the plants.

The distinction between AQIS facilities and State run "private facilities" also needs to be removed. The AQIS facilities need to undergo the same external audits and reviews that State-run facilities are subjected to, to ensure that complacency does not creep into the operations.

Issue:

If many "High Risk" PEQ Centres are retained then these Centres need to be managed operationally as a national network, rather than having each Centre operate relatively independently. By managed I mean from a

science view-point. For example, the Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations (BSES) has a PEQ facility in Brisbane for importing sugar cane. This PEQ facility does not yet have a Compliance Agreement with AQIS. Treatments, pathology tests and inspections are conducted internally, and the facility has not been appropriately externally audited. Consequently, the biosecurity risks associated with this facility are not clear. Sugar is closely related to sorghum and other grasses, and they have exotic diseases in common.

Solution:

A consistent externally audited compliance standard must be applied across all facilities handling high risk plant imports. The audit process must be science based about biosecurity risks as well as auditing record keeping.

Issue:

The Tropical Forages Genetic Resource Centre at Biloela has a large number of plant species that were imported into Australia 30-40 years ago, that now would be classified as weeds.

In 2006 Biosecurity Australia conducted a review of the permitted list of species. I forwarded comments to the review, but I did not obtain a satisfactory response to questions that I raised. In one reply Biosecurity Australia said that I should contact AQIS because the particular species that I mentioned were not part of the current review.

I raised concerns about the weed status of 136 species pertaining to the review.

- 27 species that are NOT weeds, but Biosecurity Australia has classified as weeds, prohibited, or the weed status requires assessment.
- 29 species that are weeds, but Biosecurity Australia has classified as permitted, or requiring post-entry quarantine.
- 80 species that are NOT weeds, that Biosecurity Australia has not listed.

In addition there are a further 262 species in our collection at Biloela which we (DPI&F) do not have sufficient information on their weed status and Biosecurity Australia have not-listed presumably because they do not have information on their weed status.

Solution:

Biosecurity Australia and AQIS need to cooperate closely with Qld DPI&F to determine which species are classified as weeds not to be released in Australia, and which species are not weeds and could be agronomically evaluated as pastures. Qld DPI&F had staff with experience with many species and I suggest Biosecurity Australia should consult with these experts.
