

# Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee

## Written Questions on Notice – 28 August 2012

### Inquiry into the effect on Australian pineapple growers of importing fresh pineapple from Malaysia

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# RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE FROM SENATE INQUIRY

## import of pineapples from Malaysia

(Additional questions provided 28 August 2012)

### Questions from Senator Milne

#### **Question 1**

Is Biosecurity Australia able to confirm that the presence in Australia of *Erwinia chrysanthemi* was material to the 2002 decision to permit the importation of fresh pineapple from the Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Solomon Islands?

#### **Response**

In 2002, the bacterium *Erwinia chrysanthemi* was recorded as being associated with pineapple fruit in Malaysia, the Philippines and the United States (Hawaii), and this was referenced in the *Import Risk Analysis (IRA) for the Importation of Fresh Pineapple Fruit: Final IRA Report*, which considered global pests of pineapples and formed the basis of the policy for the importation of pineapples from Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Solomon Islands. The bacterium was also recorded as present in Australia on a range of hosts, and it was not under official control in Australia, and there was no evidence to suggest that it was different to the *Erwinia chrysanthemi* that occurred in these other countries. Therefore it did not meet the internationally accepted definition of, and criteria for, a quarantine pest. No issues were raised by industry or state departments relating to *Erwinia chrysanthemi* during the consultation period of the import risk analysis process at the time.

#### **Question 2**

Is *Erwinia chrysanthemi* still present in Australia and does it have a negative impact on any specific crops or plant species?

#### **Response**

*Erwinia chrysanthemi*, is now known as various *Dickeya* species and strains, following taxonomic changes internationally. It is still recorded in the Australian Plant Pest Database as *Erwinia chrysanthemi* for the specimens lodged, and is present in Australia and found on a range of hosts including potatoes, maize, ginger, bananas, taro and *Dieffenbachia* (the lily-like Araceae family). It can cause soft rot of potatoes, corn stalk rot, soft-rot of ginger, corm rot of banana and corm soft rot of taro.

#### **Question 3**

The Committee understands that BA is unable to confirm whether *Dickeya* sp is present in Australia. What action does BA intend to take to confirm the presence/absence of the disease?

#### **Response**

The bacterium *Erwinia chrysanthemi* (pineapple strain, *Dickeya* sp.) causing pineapple collapse and heart rot of pineapples in Malaysia has not been recorded by the pineapple industry, or the plant pathologists of the relevant state departments of agriculture, in Australia on pineapples growing in Australia. In conducting the risk assessment DAFF has taken a

conservative approach and accepted that this particular strain, specifically affecting pineapples, may be absent from Australia.

No changes will be made to this conservative position, unless there is evidence to alter this view. In this context, Australia has a highly developed national plant health system which, in its entirety, provides evidence of the presence or absence of plant pests and diseases. A wide range of activities is undertaken through the growing and managing for export of plants and plant products that generate knowledge, data and intelligence relating to Australia's plant pest status. This includes the monitoring, observation and surveillance of pests and diseases on plants conducted by a range of people and jurisdictions such as growers, crop monitors, state and territory department entomologists, plant pathologists and extension officers, as well as the general public and other sectors of the technical community, such as those in environment fields. These activities are supported by taxonomic identification, confirmation and recording and notification of new or previously unidentified pests, and the lodging of specimens in state and national collections that provide the repositories of information to support Australia's claims of pest status.

#### **Question 4**

The Committee understands that *Dickeya* sp is known to occur in the Philippines (Brazil, Costa Rica and Hawaii). Does BA intend to reassess the 2002 IRA, given the subsequent discovery that *Dickeya* sp causes fruit collapse?

#### **Response**

The status of recorded presence in other countries and Australia of *Erwinia chrysanthemi* (pineapples strain, *Dickeya* sp.) and other *Dickeya* species will be monitored and amended, as necessary, to reflect whatever changes occur in taxonomy as a result of scientific assessment.

The risk assessment for *Erwinia chrysanthemi* (pineapple strain, *Dickeya* sp.) conducted for Malaysian pineapples, based on the commercial production, processing, transport, and overall management set out in the IRA, results in an overall risk estimate of 'very low'. This meets Australia's appropriate level of protection. Therefore, the application of any quarantine measures, additional to those already specified for the proposed import of Malaysian pineapples, or for the existing trade in Philippine pineapples, is not scientifically justified.

Any future requests for access for pineapples from other countries where this disease is known to be present, or for purposes other than human consumption, for example, nursery stock for planting purposes, would be assessed separately to determine the risks appropriate for the end use.

## Questions from Mr Glenn Taniguchi, University of Hawaii

1. Throughout this testimony the figure 2% risk of importing infected fruits into Australia is mentioned. The question of how this figure was derived has not been answered. Is this an arbitrary number to coincide with “low risk”? A 2% risk cannot be a fixed figure when dealing with infections with *Dickeya* sp. because field infections fluctuate with weather conditions. Normal field infection ranges between 5% and 40%. Thus your risk goes up when field infection is higher.

### DAFF response

As DAFF indicated in the Senate hearing (draft Hansard pg 34)

**Ms Gardner:** The two per cent is based on scientific research that was done in Malaysia. That was the basis. The disease usually expresses two to three weeks before harvest. You will see it on the pineapples in the field; it will be quite obvious and it might be explosive in some cases. Obviously they are not going to pick those pineapples that are rotting and not very good. These are commercial plantations sending to an export market. They are looking to send the best fruit they can. The latency does not always break two to three weeks before harvest but the majority of them will, so you will see those symptoms on the fruit. Those will be excluded. So it will be there some time before you take them off and put them through the processing plant for export. There will be up to two per cent—and we have used a very conservative figure. That does not mean to say that every pineapple plantation in Malaysia will have two per cent latency in their fruit, but we were looking on the conservative side that up to two per cent will—and it may be a lot fewer than that.

**CHAIR:** Was that evidence that you say was based on science gained in Malaysia—that two per cent—peer reviewed?

**Ms Gardner:** Yes. They were in scientific journals.

**CHAIR:** Could we have at this committee?

**Ms Gardner:** Yes, it is referenced in the IRA and we have copies in here.

The up to 2% refers to the potential level of latent infection in pineapples after harvest. The references referring to the 2% latency are:

1. Lim WH, Lowings PH (1979) Pineapple fruit collapse in Peninsular Malaysia: symptoms and varietal susceptibility. *Plant Disease Reporter* 63: 170–174
2. Lim WH (1986) Bacterial diseases of pineapple. *Review of Tropical Plant Pathology* 2: 127–140 (referring to: Thompson A (1937) Pineapple fruit rots in Malaya: A preliminary report on fruit rots of the Singapore Canning Pineapple. *Malaysian Agricultural Journal* 25: 407–420.)

2. Who is to gain by the importation and sales of Malaysian pineapples in Australia? This has not been made clear. Is this importation meant to help Malaysian growers at the expense of Australia growers?

### DAFF response

This is an import risk analysis based on the risks associated with potential pathways through which a pest or disease could enter into and establish and spread in Australia. The issue of commercial benefit is not germane to this process. DAFF fulfils its obligations and responsibilities in respect of import requests from other countries under the WTO’s Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement.

3. Burden of Proof: It seems rather strange that the Australian pineapple growers are burdened with the task of proving it risky to import Malaysian pineapples to compete with their production. It should be reversed with the burden placed on Malaysia to provide evidence through a 3<sup>rd</sup> party

*that is not interested or involved in this transaction to determine if their fruits are 100% safe and risk free.*

**DAFF response**

It is the Australian Government – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry that conducts the risk analysis based on available scientific evidence. The draft risk analysis report is open for consultation and comments both domestically and internationally. DAFF considered and will continue to consider any scientific evidence that is provided by stakeholders, or is sourced through DAFF’s surveillance of production systems and scientific literature relating to imported commodities.

*4. Eradication: Throughout the testimony the term eradication is constantly used in reference to when and if the disease enters Australia. Once you have infection, it is forever! There is no hope of eradication. Maybe containment through quarantine measures, but it is not a sure thing. How can you eradicate something when you cannot see the organism?*

**DAFF response**

Eradication and/or control are considerations relevant only if an incursion of a pest or disease should occur. The objective of risk analysis and the implementation and management of quarantine control measures is to reduce the level of risk to below an acceptable level, which in Australia’s case is “very low, but not zero” (Australia’s ALOP). Text in the provisional final IRA report which caused unintended concern to stakeholders has been removed.

*5. I would think that the Australian government would be more supportive in perpetuating the pineapple industry in Australia then the pineapple industry of Malaysia. What is presented before them is a certain slow and painful death of the industry should Dickeya sp. enter Australia. If Malaysian pineapples are allowed to enter Australia it will be a matter of when not if Dickeya sp. enters Australia.*

**DAFF response**

The objective of risk analysis and the implementation and management of quarantine control measures is to reduce the level of risk to below an acceptable level, which in Australia’s case is “very low, but not zero” (Australia’s ALOP). Unlike the situation in Hawaii, where the imported pineapple material was explicitly for direct planting purposes, the pineapple fruits, proposed for import to Australia, are decrowned and intended for human consumption.

*6. Money should be spent aiding the pineapple industry in these struggling times. In Hawaii the government support for research and innovations has ended and consequently the industry has shrunk considerably with the closure of 2 plantations. We no longer export fruits actively but rather market locally. Is this what the Australian growers can look forward too?*

**DAFF response**

This is an opinion and not relevant to the risk assessment.

## **Taniguchi – Appendices 1&2**

### **DAFF response**

The information in these appendices has already been considered by DAFF and incorporated where relevant by DAFF in the risk assessment in the provisional final report through:

- 1) DAFF's review of the Hawaiian literature on bacterial heart rot
- 2) the information provided by Mr Glenn Taniguchi in emails to Mr Col Scott, Tropical Pines agronomist, which were included in the Growcom submission on the draft IRA report in December 2011 (confidential appendix 2 of submission)
- 3) email correspondence initiated by DAFF to Mr Taniguchi and the authors of the article in *Pineapple News 2011* – Dr Anna Alvaraz and Ms Glorimar Marero seeking further informed advice and supporting data.

*The Committee has requested DAFF to respond to three specific issues raised in Appendices 1&2.*

#### ***A. the risk assessment matrix***

##### **DAFF response**

Chapter 2 of the draft and provisional final import risk analysis reports describes and explains the qualitative risk methodology used by Australia for its pest risk analyses for over a decade and accepted by the states and territories of Australia. The pest risk analysis methodology is based on the Australian and New Zealand Standard on Risk Management and fulfils the obligations set out in the SPS Agreement and the standards for pest risk analysis developed by the Office International des Epizooties (OIE) and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) of the FAO.

#### ***B the impact of weather conditions on plantation infection rates***

##### **DAFF response**

Infection rates and subsequent losses from *E. chrysanthemi*/*Dickeya* sp. in pineapple vary with weather and soil conditions. As in Hawaii, this is the case in Malaysia and other places where this pathogen exists.

#### ***C the need for more research regarding potential disease hosts.***

##### **DAFF response**

DAFF will consider any additional scientific evidence provided and had sought supporting data from the Hawaiian researchers for the claim of the pineapple strain affecting other hosts. As is the case in Hawaii, various *Erwinia* (*Dickeya*) species are found in Australia already affecting corn, taro and other hosts.