



BA admits error in report

THE credibility of federal quarantine regulator Biosecurity Australia is in tatters following the admission of a crucial error in computer models used to assess pest and disease risks in the Philippines banana revised draft Import Risk Analysis.

The Australian Banana Growers' Council regards this error as being so significant that the situation can only be remedied by a review of the science and modelling involved in the IRA by a fresh team of experts.

"ABGC has a complete lack of confidence in Biosecurity Australia's conduct of this import risk analysis process and this admission of an error in the model demonstrates that our concerns were well founded," said ABGC imports spokesman Len Collins.

"We have high-calibre scientific consultants working with us on this issue and they recognised a serious fault in the model within days of the release of the revised draft IRA.

"But Biosecurity Australia ignored our concerns. We had tried on many occasions to bring BA's attention to errors in their risk modelling and they finally were forced to acknowledge there was a problem in an embarrassing about-face."

On March 17, BA said: "It appears that a transcription error in one cell of an Excel spreadsheet occurred while converting a written formula from the text of the revised draft IRA into electronic format."

"Following confirmation from statisticians that the error has occurred,

the spreadsheet has now been corrected. Preliminary assessment indicates that, as a result of this change, some quarantine measures may need to be reassessed and strengthened," said BA's Mary Harwood.

Mr Collins said ABGC has written to Agriculture Minister Warren Truss requesting his intervention in this process and for the appointment of a fresh team to review this case.

"We are certain more deficiencies will be revealed. The earlier draft IRA rejected imports because of pest and disease risks and those risks have not diminished," Mr Collins said.

"There are 22 diseases and insects of quarantine concern in the Philippines and at least four diseases and one insect present grave risks."

Industry's commitment shines spotlight on flaw

A MONTH ago the banana industry had a steamroller heading its way as Biosecurity Australia gave tacit approval to the importation of bananas from the Philippines in a revised draft Import Risk Analysis.

ABGC came out forcefully against this new report using its four-pronged approach engaging scientific, media, political and legal strategies.

We had thought there was something fishy about the 20-month delay in ratifying the earlier draft that continued the current ban on imports because of associated disease risks so we were not really surprised by the backflip.

What we were shocked by though was the pathetic "micky mouse" measures proposed to mitigate against the pest and disease risks and the inadequacy of the scientific justifications contained in the

revised draft Import Risk Analysis report (dipping in chlorine and using scrubbing brushes to remove mealy bugs, if you please).

It did not take long for credible, independent scientists to speak critically of the science underpinning the report (see next page).

But who would have thought that within a month of announcing this new decision, Biosecurity Australia would be forced to admit that it had made a mistake in its computer modelling of risks and that "some quarantine measures may need to be reassessed and strengthened"?

Let me tell you this – without banana growers putting their money where their mouth is and engaging leading scientific and legal experts to help industry's strong and determined campaign against imports, these bureaucrats might have got away with this bungle.



Len Collins ... ABGC imports committee chairman

I thank growers for their ongoing support. I thank those many elected Members of Parliament of all political persuasions who are helping us ensure that Australia's high quarantine standards and clean, safe food production systems are maintained above all else. I also thank the media for providing extensive coverage of our concerns.



Premier Peter Beattie, Len Collins, Jane Milburn and Minister Henry Palaszczuk at the Rural Press Club Breakfast.

State govts back industry

THE Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries is preparing a formal response to the revised draft IRA on behalf of the Queensland Government.

During meetings with industry, Minister Henry Palaszczuk made it clear the Queensland Government did not want to jeopardise the industry by leaving it at risk to exotic pests and diseases.

Mr Palaszczuk told Parliament (Thursday March 18) that "...with regard to the input into the IRA, five scientific experts employed by the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries were engaged by Biosecurity Australia – two as members of the IRA team and three as members of the technical working groups."

"These scientists participated as experts in their own right, not as representatives of the DPIF. Their input was subject to confidentiality agreements with Biosecurity Australia."

"I am advised that at no stage have members of the IRA team been asked to vote or sign-off that they agree with every element of substance in the report."

"It is a nonsense to suggest that, because Biosecurity Australia engaged experts from Queensland in developing the revised draft IRA, the Queensland Government supports the draft IRA. That is incorrect," Mr Palaszczuk said in response to a question from the Opposition.

Len Collins attended a Rural Press Club breakfast on March 19 addressed by Premier Beattie and had the opportunity to brief the Premier and Minister Palaszczuk on bananas.

Meanwhile, New South Wales Agriculture Minister Ian Macdonald has told Bananas NSW CEO Ross Boyle that his government will be putting in a strong submission supporting industry's position that this decision must be honestly and transparently based on science and quarantine issues.

Save the Aussie Banana bender

AT least 650 banana growers, local business people and residents attended ABGC meetings in Innisfail and Tully recently where Len Collins announced the reintroduction of the 5c/carton BIFF levy.

Mr Collins said the levy would help resource the Save the Aussie Banana Campaign.

Local business people are supporting the industry with a range of endeavours, the first of which is the Tully Agri Aide concert organised by the Tully Chamber of Commerce on Saturday April 3 which will see the Wolverines and Beccy Cole performing at the Tully Showgrounds.

Credible criticism hits home

TWO independent, international experts have made informed and considered criticism of the science underpinning the revised draft Import Risk Analysis on bananas from the Philippines.

Plant bacteriologist Dr Mark Fegan from the CRC for Tropical Plant Protection said current research into Moko disease does not support the decision to pave the way for allowing imports from the Philippines.

Then plant virologist Professor James Dale from Queensland University of Technology said the Biosecurity Australia report was fundamentally flawed in its assessment of the risk from Banana Bract Mosaic Virus.

Dr Fegan said: "There are a number of facts and figures that Biosecurity Australia has used in their measure of acceptable risk that are, at best, questionable and lacking in scientific rigour."

"Biosecurity Australia's assumption that banana plants need only 12 weeks from first infection before they will show symptoms of disease infection contradicts even the Philippines' data which suggests that plants with Moko disease in that country will take greater than 13 weeks to show symptoms."

"Research suggests that banana plants can in fact take up to 24 weeks to show symptoms of Moko disease, depending on the strain of the bacterium," Dr Fegan said.

Professor Dale, who undertook World-Bank funded Banana Bract Mosaic Virus research in the mid-90s and is now Director of the Science Research Centre in QUT's Faculty of Science, says it is hard to fathom how Biosecurity Australia could conclude that there was only a very low probability of importing BBrMV with Philippines bananas.

"The Banana Bract Mosaic Virus case contained in this revised draft Import Risk Analysis is not based on defensible scientific evidence," Professor Dale said.

In addition, Professor Dale said the scientific view contained in the report represents a complete reversal of an earlier Australian Quarantine Inspection Service ruling in the late '90s that rejected the importation of BBrMV into a strictly controlled quarantine glasshouse in Melbourne for research purposes because there was not enough known about the virus or its host range.

Nats push science case

SENATOR Ron Boswell, Member for Richmond Larry Anthony and Member for Cowper Luke Hartsuyker met with Len Collins, ABGC CEO Tony Heidrich and scientific consultants late in February to hear the industry's perspective on the science case contained in the revised draft IRA report.

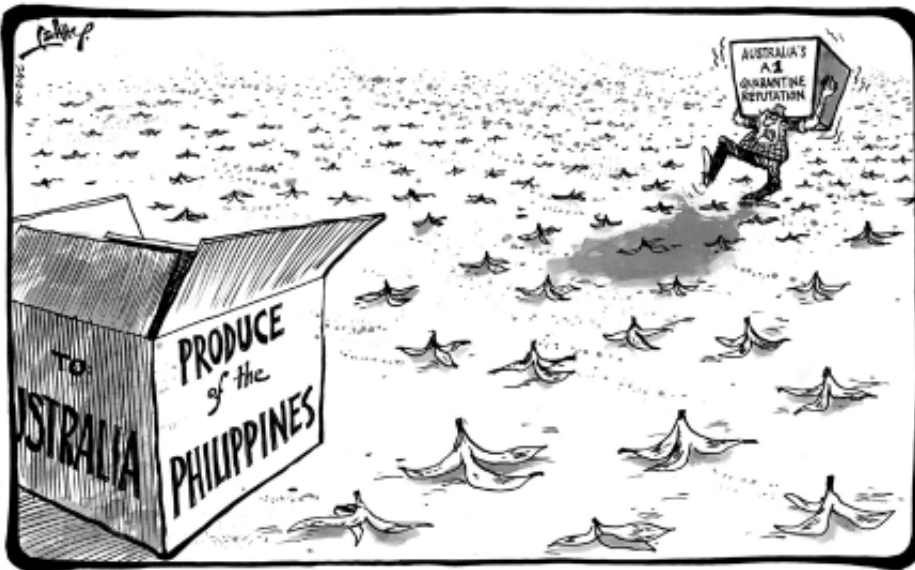
After the briefing, Senator Ron Boswell said he would support the industry by asking Biosecurity Australia for an explanation about the points of difference raised.

At the time, Senator Boswell said: "I am not prepared to go into detail at this stage, but it is fair to say that the scientists believe that there are flaws in the latest IRA report and they are working on putting together their facts and building their argument so that I can present it to Biosecurity Australia within the 60-day timeframe."

In an embarrassing about-face for the quarantine regulator, BA has since admitted to an error in its risk modelling and is now rerunning the risk assessments.



Key Nationals, banana leaders and consultants (from left) David Pullar, Ray Correll, Len Collins, Luke Hartsuyker, Larry Anthony, Tony Heidrich and Senator Ron Boswell (front).



Cartoonist Sean Leahy's (above) view ... *The Courier-Mail*, February 24
Bill George and Val Currie (below left) lead the rally. Photo by Brian Cassey.



NQ rallies for a show of strength

THANKS to Val Currie and her team, as well as businesses, individuals and politicians who made the trek to Cairns on February 27.

Federal Member for Kennedy Bob Katter, and State Members Marc Rowell and Rosa Lee Long were the only parliamentarians in attendance

but the crowd responded to speeches from the likes of Val, Gordon Wone and Bill George.

Bananas donated by Rigatos were enjoyed by the crowd and a chant of "save our skins" was captured by the contingent of media in attendance.

Where to from here?

BIOSECURITY Australia bureaucrats are now assessing how the spreadsheet error affects the recommendations contained within the revised draft IRA.

In coming weeks, BA's Risk Assessment Panel will consider what additional risk management measures may be required to bring the overall risk down to a satisfactory level.

Biosecurity Australia will then release an addendum to the revised draft IRA and provide a further 60-day comment period for stakeholders once the addendum is posted on BA's website.

Biosecurity Australia can then take as long as it wishes to consider submissions from stakeholders or any new science that has come to light since the release of the most recent draft.

The Senate Inquiry is due to consider this matter further at a hearing in Brisbane the week after Easter.

There is also a prospect that the Senate Committee conducting the inquiry will visit north Queensland on a fact-finding mission.

Anyone is entitled to make a submission to BA and such submissions can be as short as one page.

Information and hotlinks are available on the Save the Aussie Banana page of the ABGC website at www.abgc.org.au

Senators probe BA methods

THE Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee held initial hearings in Canberra in early March and extracted some significant admissions from Biosecurity Australia bureaucrats.

The committee is chaired by Liberal Senator Bill Heffernan (NSW) who, after repeated questioning on March 8, gained an admission from BA executive manager **Mary Harwood** that: "It is possible for a (imported) fruit to have the Moko bacterium in it."

In relation to questioning about the lack of a paper trail or minutes of meetings of the IRA panel, Hansard records this exchange:

Chair (Senator Heffernan): So there are no fingerprints, we cannot say, "That was Bill Jones's bit of brilliance there and that was someone else's over there." It somehow all flows together and there is no paper trail?

Dr McRae: In effect, that is correct.

Senator Boswell: So everyone of those seven scientists, including the ones in Queensland – and be careful here, you are on oath – agreed that the IRA was correct and agreed with every position in it? That should not require a conference between witnesses, it is a very simple question.

Chair: It is either yes or no.

Senator Boswell: It is either yes or no.

Dr McRae: Perhaps as the chair of the IRA team I should answer this. There were seven members of that team and, as I said, I chaired it. The report was unanimous. In other words, every one of those seven people agreed that we should release the document with the text as written.

Chair: Yes, but that is not saying they agreed with it.

Dr McRae: Every single word of that text should be released.

Chair: You are still evading the question. What you just said does not mean that they all agreed with everything that was in it. They agreed to release the text as it was, but that does not necessarily say that they as individuals agreed with everything in it.

Senator Boswell: Did they sign off as agreeing with the report?

Dr McRae: Yes.

Senator McLucas: Let's go to the difference between the first and second



Senator Heffernan



Senator Boswell



Senator Jan McLucas and Opposition Agriculture spokesman Gavan O'Connor visited Mackay Estates.



Senator John Cherry at a media conference on bananas in Canberra.

draft reports. It is fairly obvious to anyone that they are enormously different. After the first draft report came out there was a period of time where you received submissions. Is that set of submissions that were received on the public record?

Ms Harwood: Yes.

Senator McLucas: What was the nature of the discussion at the next meeting? There must have been alarm bells ringing when the scientists said, "Hang on, we've really got this wrong on Moko," for example.

Ms Harwood: This process they go through is to consider all the submissions and to address the scientific issues that they raise.

Senator McLucas: When did it become evident in the life of the committee during the development of the second draft report that there was such a quantum shift in the view of those seven scientists?

Dr McRae: I am wondering if you might rephrase that question. There were a number of submissions made on the first IRA – I believe there were about 20 – and there were many varying technical viewpoints presented. There was an indication to the IRA team that we should reconsider all of the available evidence – review that and investigate further.

Senator Cherry: I think you have come close to – not quite but almost – misleading the committee. As I understand it, the vast majority of the probabilities used to assess risk were significantly reduced in this report. I am looking at my papers here, and nine out of 13 probabilities on Moko risk were reduced, nine out of 13 for black Sigatoka were reduced, six out of 13 for Freckle were reduced and seven out of 13 on mealy bugs were reduced. That is a trend, really. You were implying that there was an increase in some probabilities but as far as I can read from this there were only two increases on mealybugs.

Dr McRae: With respect, that is not correct. For instance, in the ones I can see in front of me now there are at least two individual estimates for parts of the assessment for Moko that have been increased. My recollection is that there are other estimates for other quarantine pests that were raised. It is quite true that some were lowered; I am not denying that or walking away from that. The IRA team interpreted all of the available evidence before us. As I have said before, we debated much of that, sometimes at length. Our interpretations have changed on some elements of each one of the assessments.

Senator Boswell: What weight have you put on the NAPPO document that was part of your report?

Dr McRae: We used the NAPPO – that is the North American Plant Protection Organisation – standard, and the title of that is *Guidelines for the establishment, maintenance and verification of areas of low pest prevalence for insects*. We used that standard as our guide in developing our recommendations for low pest prevalence for moko in our report.

(Editor's NOTE: Moko is a plant disease not an insect.)