



Taro Growers Australia

General meeting of Taro Growers Australia, 4th June, 2007

held at the Wet Tropics Research Centre of the DPI&F, South Johnstone, and beginning at 7:15 PM

Present:

K.Lake, R.Hourston, J.Doyle, K.Nguyen, J.Daniells, W.Spaaai and Bert, S.Phillips

Apologies: P.Salleras

Minutes:

The Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 30th October 2006 were read by the Secretary.

Matters Arising from Minutes:

Discussion was put forward whether 'off label permits', may be better off under the umbrella of Asian foods

MOTION that the minutes are an accurate report of the meetings on 30th October 2006. Moved R.Hourston, seconded J.Doyle. PASSED.

Treasurer's Report:

Balance as at 30/10/06	\$348.56
Expense (Registration)	\$37.00
Subs	<u>\$130.00</u>
Balance as at 04/06/07	<u>\$441.56</u>

MOTION that the Treasurer's Report be accepted. Moved S.Phillips, seconded K.Lake PASSED

General Business:

Ken brought up the the topic of bulk quarter ton bins of taro being on the market floor. There was concerns that if taro was being marketed in bulk, rather than separate boxes, it would lower the grower price. Mention was made to look into this issue and find means of addressing it.

Jeff handed out the final Taropest CD and handbook to members, he also displayed a poster that showed some of the major pest/diseases of taro in the Pacific region. There was discussion that TGA should send a letter of appreciation to the developers and ACIAR for being included in the Taropest project.

Jeff also offered the opportunity for TGA to consider, the next steps for research and development in the Taro Industry Plan. It was suggested 4-5 representatives of TGA, meet at a later date in mid-August. Discussion was passed to the future needs of taro, improving on the 'taste' area of taro which would help break into the european Australian markets. Jeff suggested utilizing the publicity of the "Australia" that was filmed in Bowen, as a means to promote taro awareness.

The RIRDC funded Machinery Project, placed on the table, an offer of options, on the future of Craig Lemin's taro washer, currently being held at the DPI&F. It was decided, if it couldn't remain as a functioning unit for the industry, it maybe better utilized by TGA for parts in future development. Whatever the outcome, the washer was considered too valuable, to be left homeless.

The next meeting was decided to be a field day in Mossman, early August at the Dieter Kirchner's farm.

MEETING ENDED 8:50 pm

Signed secretary
Sam Phillips

Next Meeting: Saturday 11th August 2007

Next Meeting is a Field day on **Saturday 11th August, 11:30 am** at Dieter Kirchner's farm on Whynabeel Rd Mossman. Dieter's operation would be of interest to growers as he has successfully grown large taro (up to 5kg) using organic methods.

Head past Mossman, towards Daintree, at

Miallo (6-7km from Mossman), go straight ahead (off main highway) past Miallo School, then left onto Whyanbeel Rd, follow for about 6 km, past end of tarseal, over Shultz Bridge, then just past the 'GlassBlowing Studio" is Dieters on right.

There'll be a red bucket hanging by the driveway.

Taro Exports to NZ

We received an enquiry from an exporting company, that was interested in sending taro to New Zealand.

They've been exporting mangoes to NZ for the last 3 years and were looking into including taro. After discussion with Sonny and Rebecca, it was put forward there may be prospects in tapping into the Asian market of NZ, which could be at present, unfulfilled. The Pacific Island markets are more or less catered for by the Islands (Fiji). Sonny expressed that the quality of Pacific Island taro grown in Australia was very high, there may be an element of that market that would be prepared to pay the higher price, required by the cost of Australian production. They're currently assessing the import/market conditions in NZ and will keep in touch.

I'll include their details here if anybody wishes to directly contact, .

Sonny Iosefa, Director
Saahttl Pty Ltd
2 Minda Place, Whalan
NSW 2770
Ph: 02 9675 5764
M: 0431 040 757 or 0401 930 526
Email: saahttl@bigpond.net.au

We also got a call from an importer of Fijian taro in Brisbane. It appears it's been too difficult in obtaining permits to import taro, and David was trying to source Pacific taro here in Australia. He wasn't prepared at this point to offer more than \$2.00-\$2.50 kg. I mentioned there wouldn't be many growers viably able to produce taro, for that amount. I'll leave his contact here if anybody's interested:

David Paul
Ph 07 3371 2716 (Home)
Mob 0417 769 603
Work Ph 3361 7328

We also had a number of calls from retailers/agents requesting the availability of Pacific taro from the association. This does indicate there has been a restriction on taro imports. Nothing officially has been declared, other than the assumption that, AQIS is just, ...too nervous ...to look at another taro!!

Taro Imports

Continuing with our never-ending battle, the next step we took, was to take advantage of the upcoming elections... thus, sourced all the Political party Leaders, Senators from each party and associated MP's. With this, they and Canberra got 'bombed' with our misery, using Taro Imports excerpts from our last 4 newsletters.

There was pleasing response...

Senator Milne of the Greens Party quickly took up the issue on our behalf. She's been involved with the Apple imports, citrus cankers etc. It then went straight to the Senate, and within a matter of days, the Senate secretary put the Taro imports on the Senate agenda. The Senate decided to use our supplied newsletters as 'evidence', thus all the remaining Senators involved, got copies. Being assigned as 'evidence' it was also sent to those concerned in Mr McGauran's office !!!

We then got a call from the Senate, who had met, and said, we have so many issues raised, in our newsletters, that they are a little swamped by it all. Could we provide them with a summary of the main points (around one page) we'd like to ask AQIS!!

There wasn't much time, it had to be in that afternoon, so with extreme difficulty, tried to gather all of our precious dribble, into a one page pile and rattle through to the Senate, what we thought, were the questions of interest.

The attempt was to cover the areas of failure, by AQIS, to address 1) Inspection of imports, 2) use of scientific principles 3) undergo an appropriate Investigation 4) writing and adhering to, their own legal conditions.. 5) and reasons of, why AQIS and BA think they should exist, which are listed below...

QUESTIONS TO AQIS AND BA:

1 a) If leading International authorities on taro, such as the

ACIAR (Australian Centre of International Agricultural Research), IPPC (International Plant Protection Committee), IPGRO (International Plant Genetic Research Organisation), SPC (Secretariat of Pacific Communities) and the UN FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation), all uniformly agree, that the taro species *Colocasia spp* share the same propagative characteristics, i.e"...... *Each cormel or each daughter corm has a terminal bud at its tip, and axillary buds in the axils of the numerous scale leaves all over its body.*" (Chapter 2.3 Morphology and Anatomy of Taro Cultivation in Asia and the Pacific written by the FAO.)

And stipulated by AQIS ICON Import condition (pertaining to taro) **C10120** *Applications to import Colocasia spp. as live plants (other than tissue cultures) and or tubers for growing will not be approved."*

Why is it, despite the above declarations, that AQIS and BA have allowed propagative taro corms into Australia?

b) If the above International authorities express the propagative/pest/disease issues, are all shared by, all varieties of taro i.e *Colocasia spp*, what is the reason that AQIS and BA have divisions of the biosecurity threats, between the large and small corm varieties of taro?

i) In reference to the above and Mr McGauran's letter of 9th August 2006 to Taro Growers Australia, quote "*In the case of large corm taro, Biosecurity Australia has made the decision that the risks can be managed so that imports can continue while a review of import conditions for fresh taro is being conducted"*

What was the basis, on which this 'decision', by Biosecurity Australia, was made?

c) For what reason, was the acceptance and acknowledgement made by AQIS and BA, of Taro Leaf Blight in Samoa, to the extent that AQIS/ BA sent advisory staff to assist, in further such prevention, as in the AQIS/BA newsletters 'AQIS Bulletin April 2005' and 'BA News June 2005' and yet do not acknowledge the threat, of the same Taro Leaf Blight disease, to Australia from Chinese taro imports, which (China) is endemic with Taro Leaf Blight?.

2 a) For what reason was the onus of consultation and expertise placed upon our association for the detection of imported taro risk, and not acknowledged at the prevention of the same risk? Why are we (Taro Growers) required to perform the duties of AQIS inspectors?

Taro Imports cont..

b) i) If the recent AQIS Investigation of Chinese imported taro, planted in Northern Territory, had only a botanist and entomologist present, who was present to give an authorised comment on the presence of plant diseases? (i.e. plant pathologist).

ii) As a result of the investigation by AQIS, (regarding the alleged small corm imported taro from China, being cultivated in the Northern Territory,) Was the taro in question destroyed? or left as a marketable cultivation? Why has tissue cultured material for our members, still being quarantined for the last 5 years, and imported taro allowed to be, and remain, planted ?

iii) Why wasn't the above NT imported taro immediately quarantined by AQIS, as observed by an NT DPIF&M officer, as a preventative biosecurity measure? (Mark Traynors email of 29 August 2006 "...our officers have visited TV farms and observed boxes of and recently planted areas of imported "small corm taro"". What effort was made by AQIS, to acquire evidence, pertaining to the origins of this taro?

c) What course of action was taken by AQIS, of the small corm taro reported to be found on the Sydney markets on December 8th 2006? (*After the claims of PQA0501 "Consignments certified prior to 30 November 2006 will be inspected and if the AQIS inspectors suspected the taro to be of the non permitted variety Colocasia esculenta var antiquorum, then the consignments of taro must be rejected.*)

3) In reference to the size and weight restrictions of large corm taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) in the most recent PQA0501 of December 1st 2006, and Deputy Prime Minister, Mark Vaile in his letter of (8th August 2006) quote "...Non scientific considerations, including trade, do not form a part of Australia's risk assessment process".

What is the reason, that there is an import restriction of only 'small' large corm taro, if non scientific considerations, including trade, do not form a part of Australia's risk assessment process?

Are we to believe, that because of AQIS's inability to determine the difference, between small corm taro and the small large corm taro, that the amended contents of PQA0501 are a scientific consideration?

4) In reference to **AQIS ICON Import Condition C6016:**
"2.b " The tubers have been inspected and are topped and free from all foliage including petiole bases, and free from sprouting suckers and attached daughter corms, and are free from soil."

"2.c."The product is free from Potato Cyst Nematode (PCN) (*Globodera rostochiensis* and *Globodera pallida*) and potato black wart fungus (*Synchytrium endobioticum*) and;

Mike Robbins claims of "...*There is no prohibition on small corms (eg daughter corms) of Colocasia esculenta var esculenta.*" in his email to me of Friday 17 November 2006, and the media release of AQIS spokesman Carson Creagh to The Cairns Post (November 22nd 2006), I quote "... *There's no problems on imports of small or daughtercorms of large-cormed taro*"

If daughter corms of large corm taro are permissible (as per PQA0501) into Australia by AQIS, what would be the course of action, taken by AQIS inspectors when confronted with imported, boxes of soil, boxes of sprouting suckers, boxes of insects, boxes of potato wart viruses? Why wouldn't the above boxes be allowed in, if daughtercorms under the same clause are?

5) If it has been indicated by the above questions, that AQIS and BA have a) failed to inspect imported taro b) failed to exercise an acceptable investigation c) failed to write legally acceptable import conditions d) failed to impliment sound scientific principles; What would be an acceptable reason, for the Federal Government, to allocate funds to the departments of AQIS and BA?

END

So we heard back from Senator Milnes office :

From: [Underwood, Sophie \(Sen C. Milne\)](#)
To: sphil@iprimus.com.au
Cc: [Underwood, Sophie \(Sen C. Milne\)](#)
Sent: Monday, June 25, 2007 5:26 PM
Subject: Taro Issue

Dear Sam,

Christine asked me to notify you that the questions that you emailed her have been incorporated into the correspondence sent from the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport to the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service.

We will let you know once we have received a reply.

Kind regards,

Sophie

Taro Imports

With this, we thought to give Sophie a ring, to see of the time frame by which AQIS has to reply, and an idea of the process.

From what was understood, written questions from the Senate, are normally directed at a Minister, of which there is a period of 30 days to reply. When an entire govt Department has been 'put on notice' so to speak, by the Senate, which in parliamentary historyis most unusual !!

Sophie still thought the 30 days may still apply, but will let us know otherwise.

Another unusual event, in the Senate that week, (after they saw our case) was the unanimous

decision of *all* the Senators (from *all* the political parties) to favour the Australian apple industry, over the 'claims' of Biosecurity Australia, regarding Apple imports and fireblight disease from NZ!!

Anyways, all that aside, it is really fortunate that the Senate took us on board seriously and we managed to get squeezed in just days before the Winter break. Also the Senate allowed us the opportunity to put forward our questions, on their behalf, which I think, from such a minority group such as ours, is something of an honour and privilege.

The Senate won't meet again until August 7th, so I guess we won't hear much until after then.

Taro Imports : Plant Health Australia

As a favourable spin-off, to the taro import saga, we were fortunate in catching the attention of Plant Health Australia. PHA is a national peak industry body, representing the members over 25 major Plant industries such as, Apple/Pear, Rice, Cotton, Sugarcane, Banana, Citrus, Almond, Table Grapes, Growcom, Onions, Grains, Canned Fruits, Nuts, Dried Fruits, Wines, Commercial Nurseries etc. PHA has also member associates e.g CSIRO, AWB, BSES, GRDC ,HAL as well as State and Territory govts..

In the general picture, PHA is pretty much well at the top, representing the large industry interests. It is a non-profit, non political, technical\scientific advisory group, which addresses and coordinates responses to priority plant health issues in Australia.

To give you some idea, there are some 30,000 wheat farmers, in just *part* of, the Grain Industry alone.

In the general picture, our status, as taro growers, would hardly rate as, not even 'half a peanut'!!!

We're almost like, the proverbial 'needle in a haystack...'

I'm not sure whether PHA saw the need of acknowledging minor industries from all our noise, or they had previously foreseen it, but as it happened, we were invited along with the olive and green tea growers, to participate in the Biosecurity Planning Framework for New and Emerging Industries in Canberra !

"..The aim of the meeting will be to review the existing biosecurity planning framework for its applicability to new and emerging industries, and recommend how the approach should be modified to accommodate the needs of these industries. The outcome will be relevant to all industries, however we plan to test the proposed framework against three case studies showing a range of situations – taro, green tea and olives..."

We rang Dr Ryan Wilson of PHA who was organizing the meeting, to find out the background, and what they required from us, and told him, we've got so many issues... we're probably his worst nightmare...!!! He was happy to accept any input, and was hoping travel would be arranged for us to be there.

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So with that, using our capacity, as less than 'half a peanut', threw together some points, relating to topics on the agenda. (the numbered bold print is the questions on the agenda asked by PHA). It was the intention to bring up these issues on the day (July 30th) of the meeting...

Biosecurity Planning Arrangements for New and Emerging Industries (Taro Growers Australia)

Summary of Issues as per Agenda

3) What is a new and emerging plant industry (for biosecurity purposes)?

- A 'specialty' crop – small area and volume with high value/area
- Upwards growth trend (or potential) from a 'small' base
- Another emerging problem, being less represented and yet as important, as an established plant industry.

4) Are biosecurity issues different for a new and emerging plant industry?

- Propagation material
 - Existing industries derive material from accredited source i.e DPI, Accredited nurseries and seed merchants.
 - Emerging industries(taro) derive material from fresh food markets and existing growers.
 - Population shift of material, from temperate to sub-tropical, tropical climates.
- Commitment: Higher grower turnover. Labour intensive. Lesser emphasis on long term commitment and the responsibility of that commitment, to the industry. A new grower may more easily abandon a failed crop, leaving a potential biosecurity threat undetected.
- High migrant turnover of growers, of taro/Asian food crops, new and emerging industries have a disproportionately higher level of growers with backgrounds of languages other than English. Biosecurity issues therefore would need to be translated into the languages and understood, of target ethnic groups.

- Lesser availability of resource base and scientific/horticultural advice for experienced personnel to detect potential biosecurity risks in a crop, and awareness not present to the grower, especially in isolated areas.
- Limited research capacity – little or no investment into R&D from research providers resulting in few or no 'experts'
- Lack of expertise, i.e a new grower, in determining whether nutrition, management, disease or seasonal climate is responsible for an unhealthy plant.
- Isolation. Minor crops may be scattered regionally, while may serve to contain a potential outbreak, isolation could thus also be a constraint to detection, with a lack of resource base.
- Isolation. The above point in relation to the transference of pest/disease to neighbouring crops, especially a minor crop (taro) to a major industry. i.e. Taro beetle to banana, cane and root crops.
- Emerging industries are growing at a faster rate than the traditional industries; however, resource allocation and prioritization of issues from State and Commonwealth (\$ & time) goes to the larger traditional industries

5) How would a new or emerging industry do biosecurity planning?

i. Summary of existing Industry Biosecurity Planning framework

ii. Would the approach need to be modified, and how?

- Basis of Biosecurity framework needs to be seriously addressed i.e politics allowing in biosecurity threats. AQIS contravening it's own ICON Import conditions, Inadequate AQIS inspections of imported goods, Failure of AQIS to conduct an appropriate investigation of import breaches, Failure of AQIS to address a cultivated biosecurity threat, and failure of adhering to sound scientific advice. Biosecurity Australia needs a functional brain.
- Implementation of framework needs to be addressed. Senior State Plant Health officers maybe subject to political influence, thus overlooking quarantine risks. AQIS prefers to hide inadequacies rather than deal with issues of biosecurity threats. It appears PHA is sandwiched between AQIS (at the top of the structure) and DPI (at the bottom, frontline end of the structure), Recommendations from PHA to DPI are thus subject to political influences, contravening adequate biosecurity measures.
- From the above, State Plant Health Officers need to consider any informed biosecurity threats, from minor-

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- -industries, with as much importance as established industries. These officers (e.g. NT Stuart Smith) may also need improved computer literacy and rehabilitation in responsibility, to adequately act, on the incurrence of informed potential biosecurity threats, made by minor industries
- Re-establishment of confidence between the public servant sector and the farmer sector.
- Development of internet information resources, easily accessible by all, i.e PADil and Taropest websites. Encouragement of these resources, i.e growers sending photos, to areas of expertise, via email, of any concerns, especially in isolated areas. (Taropest is extremely useful to growers, credits must be given to the developers for the usability and content of information)
- Communication required to all industry participants. Focus on the threats to their industry and then work on the issues/benefits. It is the industry who will take ownership (be the eyes) and look for incursions, spot the gaps etc. i.e *'Australian Quarantine: A shared responsibility'* recommended a public awareness campaign and a partnership approach leading to shared responsibility (by governments, industry and general public). In this type of exercise, with PHA at the very least, needs industry wide communication and industry ownership.

6) Next steps

- A revolution of politics???
- An evolution of awareness???
- Or do we ...hide under the covers ...and pretend it never happens???

Review of above points:

4) Are Biosecurity Issues Different for a new and emerging plant industry?

Some areas of characteristic factors that separate new and emerging industries from that of existing and major industries.

1. **Propagation material**
2. **Commitment**
3. **Lack of industry expertise and agricultural background.**

Propagation. Material

Existing industries tend to derive planting material from an accredited source i.e DPI , Accredited nurseries and seed

merchants.

With any developing industry, especially cash crops such as taro, propagation material isn't readily available from horticultural sources for commercial use. Most intending growers would source propagative material from other growers or the markets. The threat, as with taro, is that imported taro available at the markets is propagative, thus incurring potential biosecurity threats.

While it may be an option to discourage the practise of using market material for cultivation, it would be somewhat futile, as the mindset of the public is of the belief, that if propagative material is freely available, then the natural inclination is, to use it. We have an article from a local paper whereby a horticultural advisor recommended the fresh food markets, as a source of taro planting material. It could only be said, his advice is ethically sound and given in good faith, as it is only because of AQIS, who inappropriately allow in biosecurity threats, that his once 'sound' advice, now becomes questioned.

If allowed to continue, then the basis of taro industry plantings, are subject to threats, which could become established, as the new growers, being part of an emerging industry, source planting material, from a potentially infected source.

Recent population shifts have centred on movements from the colder south to tropical northern regions, which increases the risk of introduced threats from the domestic sector of the industry. From experience, ethnic people have showed a culinary interest in growing their own taro. Biosecurity Australia believes the cold climates of the south have prevented disease outbreak of imported Pacific taro. The risk of incursion is greatly enhanced when this imported taro is brought into tropical areas, by population migration and propagated for home use.

Trying to change the *whole* mindset of the public, who are used to advising and acquiring propagation material from the markets, is only, an ineffective 'band aid' means of addressing the issue.

Commitment.

Unlike tree crops that have a long duration before harvest, taro and Asian foods are a short term cash crop. They tend to require a lesser financial input on establishment and commitment to a period of time before harvest. It could be viewed that established plant industries such as citrus, pip and stonefruit, banana, cane etc require a stronger financial and timeframe commitment structure and thus the responsibility to maintain the wellbeing, of such a commitment, becomes paramount, with the

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grower intentions, to be in the industry for the long term.

Taro, Asian foods and cash crops tend to have a much higher turnover of growers, due to being labour intensive and as short term cash income until other longer term investment projects begin to materialise. With this higher turnover, the level of commitment to biosecurity threats wouldn't be held with the same importance, than to a farmer with a tree crop requiring a long term commitment. A new taro grower may prefer to abandon a failed crop, rather than addressing issues, leaving a potential pest/disease risk undetected.

With taro, Asian foods, there is the high occurrence of ethnic growers. Migrants readily adopt to the industry of food production, as they've had agronomy experience in their homelands, and food production is a means of securing a cash income. Because of the labour intensive nature of such crops, and the diverse opportunities offered by Australia, there is a regular turnover of ethnic growers, as they move on to other areas of employment. The growers positions then tend to be fulfilled by another wave of fresh migrants. Cultural differences, agronomy techniques and overcoming these having to constantly readdress the communication barrier, becomes another constraint to adequate high risk biosecurity planning.

Educating growers, in these situations, to high level biosecurity threats, would be compromised by the perception of 'why bother', thus relying on commitment, is a somewhat ineffectual means, of Industry Biosecurity Planning.

Again the onus should be, on government policy on stopping potential imported biosecurity threats. Any alternative means of addressing the issue, is only a 'band aid' effect, being an impractical and ineffective measure.

Lack of Industry Expertise in Emerging Industries.

Following the same lines as with a cash crop, taro is attractive to those with small holdings. The growing trend, is for city dwellers to relocate to lifestyle blocks in rural areas, thus crops such as taro, is looked upon as favourable. The biosecurity constraint faced here is, the lack of agricultural expertise in ascertaining whether a plant problem is that of nutritional management, irrigation mismanagement, seasonal climate influence or whether they've just inherited, a debilitating plant disease. As taro is free from the major debilitating pest/diseases found elsewhere in the globe, it would be difficult for experienced growers to ascertain the symptoms of an imported disease, without the assistance of expertise. i.e. pathologists etc.

In the Solomon Islands, Alomoe disease has been established

for that long, many villages consider infected taro as looking 'normal', unaware of what a healthy taro looks like. (and these are long term, traditional taro growers)

The problem faced by a new grower from the city, is not only to unknowingly overlook biosecurity threats, but also, the temptation to overlook any disease threat, knowing that their farm and neighbours farms maybe quarantined, causing depreciation in land values, severe livelihood losses and their own social standing in the community.

Established industries tend to have on hand, local expertise that can immediately determine pest/disease/biosecurity issues, from that of crop nutrition mismanagement.

Often with experienced long term farmers, there is the 'code of ethics' used by these farmers and established industries. These morals are heavily depended upon by regulating authorities, as these farmers know of the damage, disease can cause their industry. They are prepared to stop the spread, of such an incursion, even at the cost of their own personal livelihoods.

Such 'ethics' maybe unknown, to those not familiar with, or new, to the agricultural industry as, income returns, land values and community acceptance may take precedence over biosecurity decisions, thus imposing more restraints, on a 'band aid' approach of dealing with imported biosecurity issues.

Minor and emerging industries can be scattered around the country, unlike bananas, cane, etc which are shoulder to shoulder in selected areas. This creates limitations in local expertise and the feasibility, in accessibility to informed trained staff.

Advantages are, potential outbreaks are more easily contained. Disadvantages are not only may a pest/disease incursion remain undetected, but the transference of pest/disease from one industry to another. A minor crop pest/disease may transfer to a major crop i.e. Taro beetle is just as damaging to taro, as the banana, sugarcane, potato, yam & other root crops.

The diversity of Australian horticulture makes it even more difficult, to ascertain and pinpoint, the potential effects and threats, of pest/disease transference between minor and major crops.

There is a trend for farmers with such diverse crops,(banana, sugarcane, fruit trees) to grow taro as a supplementary income.

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5) How would a new or emerging industry do biosecurity planning?

How could any biosecurity planning effectively happen?

We had an incident whereby a large amount of imported taro from China was commercially planted in the NT. We informed a DPI horticultural officer, of the posed disease risk, and forwarded details of the farm, location and transport company used to deliver the taro. The officer found the taro and notified us : *Following the information we received from TGA regarding the shipment of Chinese import taro to the NT, our officers have visited TV farms and observed boxes of and recently planted areas of imported "small corm taro".*

Then his senior, a Chief Plant Health Officer later responded to us:

*Myself, as the NT Chief Plant Health Manager contacted the local AQIS office in Darwin in early August 2006 to enquire about import conditions linked to future authorised or unauthorised propagation of taro material. I was referred to the ICON website. The ICON Condition C6066 (as printed on 03 August 06) prohibits entry of fresh taro tubers of *Colocasia esculenta* var. *antiquorum* into Australia.*

The owners advised that the crop was of small corm taro.

During these contacts, the quarantine officers gained agreement for them to inspect the taro crop during it's growing phase with the aim of identifying any potential pest,, disease or agronomic problems and thus assist them to grow quality produce for eventual sale.

If required, we would request that Mark Traynor assist them in this activity as part of his general extension duties to promote the commercial cultivation of this crop in the NT.

This small corm taro was imported, prior to the suspension of all small corm taro. However, while this was 'legal', it was brought in under the condition of 'Human consumption', the market agent who imported it, couldn't sell it, because of it's poor condition, and chose to send it to the NT to plant on his farm. Thus, the consignment violated the 'human consumption' criteria of the import license, and technically came under the criteria of 'nursery stock'

This Chief Plant Health Officer should have realized that small corm taro was suspended because of the ability to propagate. The reason of this suspension, is because of recognized biosecurity threats, from propagation.

Thus this taro should have been quarantined pending investigation. AQIS Germplasm reports indicate 70% infection of up to 5 known taro viruses from import taro. AQIS Import

Condition **C10120** also states "*Applications to import *Colocasia* spp. as live plants (other than tissue cultures) and or tubers for growing will not be approved.*"

Not only was the CPHO acting with incompetence but also AQIS allowing in propagative taro corms.

Chief Plant Health Officers need to be more computer literate, in order to research for themselves, resources such as the AQIS ICON database, to make an informed decision.

Chief Plant Health Officers are placed in a position of political influence, which overrides any biosecurity recommendations that may be set forth by PHA or peak body industries.

Tissue cultured taro plants, for members of our association, are still being held under quarantine for the last 5 years. This is how serious AQIS treats quarantine threats, (in a double standard fashion) if it is processed legally.

Minor industry is not an excuse for apathy. Political influence is a major constraint to biosecurity in minor industries.

The Chief Plant Health Officer also stated : *The ICON Condition C6066 (as printed on 03 August 06) prohibits entry of fresh taro tubers of *Colocasia esculenta* var. *antiquorum* into Australia.*

We considered it unlikely therefore that the taro rumoured to be about to enter the NT would be from an overseas source

Since this incident, as per our Taro Topics Newsletters, there has been at least 2 occasions whereby 'suspended' small corm taro was still imported and cleared by AQIS. Thus if this was sent to NT for propagation, this Chief Plant Health Officer would have considered any later alert, brought to his attention as 'unlikely'.

Reliance on AQIS Import Conditions alone, by Chief Plant Health Officers, isn't a major determining factor, of biosecurity threats.

AQIS/BA/PHA/DPI framework

As derived from the above incident, a foundation basis that needs resolving, is the hierarchy, of the implementation, of Industry Biosecurity Planning objectives within Australia.

At the head of the hierarchy is AQIS and BA. The *outcomes* of the conditions and actions set by AQIS and BA, determines the planning framework of PHA. PHA being a 'technical advisory'

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and peak industry body, represented by the agricultural industry, has no political influence or agenda. PHA recommends, but has no authority to enforce, to those senior DPI officials in each State. Senior DPI officials are however, subject directly to the political influence of AQIS and DAFF, which is a paramount influence, over that of, industry biosecurity planning objectives. With this, the intentions of PHA are subject to, being mis-administered /represented, at the targeted, lower farming/frontline level. There is no corroborative means, of ensuring the intended proper administration, allowing the framework to function, as it should do, without political interference

As a result, frontline DPI staff are also subject to, having to enact duties which they may believe, are not appropriate, but must do, as they are employed as, public servants. The damaging result, other than farmer livelihoods being threatened/destroyed, is the breakdown of trust and communication between the public servants and the farming community. A further damaging result is that public servants who are in a position to act, to genuinely assist farmers, are still inadvertently tarred as 'interfering bureaucrats'. Feelings are then left on both sides, with a dependency of, no support, feedback or recognition, of any positive effort. This leads to a breakdown of morals and morale, direction and satisfaction on both sides, and at all levels of the farming sector. This is again a major constraint to effective Industry Biosecurity Planning in emerging and minor industries and the agricultural industry as a whole.

As experienced by the taro industry, there has been inappropriate action, because of this political influence, against biosecurity threats. On the other hand there has been 'gestapo' type overreaction, against other minor industries, such as the coffee growers in the Tablelands, and individual farmers, who have been subjected to livelihood decimation for no valid reason. This political veil inhibits the potentials, development and assurances of any emerging industry and only serves lower expectation levels, to that of mere survival. This cloud, of mere survival, is costly to industries, trying to protect themselves from imported biosecurity threats, and funds for this protection, is also levied from the growers themselves. Biosecurity incursions and quarantine, are all at the growers expense and worse still, are the taxes paid, to politics who create biosecurity threats. For this to be considered an 'acceptable' industry practice, can only be viewed as 'agricultural genocide'.

There needs to be a more balanced input/acknowledgement, of those that are on the farming floor, directly to top level Industry Planners (such as PHA) to prevent a breakdown of relations, on both sides, that is a major threat in all aspects, of the agricultural industry.

Acknowledgement must be given in this respect to PHA, RIRDC

in allowing farming individuals such as Taro Growers Australia, to present this...

AQIS and the Privacy Act

Regarding the AQIS Compliance and Investigation to the NT imported taro cultivation, the many flaws in their investigation, meant that AQIS invoked the Privacy Act of 1988, in order to protect their incompetence. Since this Act of 1988, there has been a repeated influx of quarantine/biosecurity outbreaks against not only minor/emerging industries but established industries as well. One would ask, how is it, of the regular occurrence of 'air borne' diseases brought in by the wind, and other 'unexplained' phenomena, since 1988 that has led to outbreaks of black sigatoka, cane smut, fruit fly, citrus cankers etc etc. Are we really led to believe, there were no cyclones or 'biologically active' weather patterns prior to 1988?

Is it really a question of AQIS taking on too much, allowing in, too many risks. Not having the capacity to conduct adequate import inspections, and creating a situation that is just too difficult to monitor and handle?

Whatever the outcome, the misuse of the Privacy Act by AQIS is a major constraint to effective biosecurity planning for new and emerging industries.

6) Next steps

I think before any framework for Industry Biosecurity Planning can take place, the foundation of this framework must be adequately addressed. Any framework built on an unstable foundation, is clemently set for presudial failure.

The primary concern is that of politics, as being the major constraint, to any Industry Biosecurity Planning. As a result, there appears to be more varieties of this 'foot and mouth' disease, prevalent amongst political tables.

Pertaining to planning Import Biosecurity Assessments, then the WTO SPS Guidelines would be considered, the foundation of this Biosecurity Planning framework. The SPS Guidelines (Article 2.1 and 2.2) is that, the rights of human, animal and plants life and wellbeing is *balanced* by sound scientific evidence, only to the extent, necessary to protect those rights. i.e While it may be considered unreasonable to allow imports of NZ apples with fire blight, that may affect the existing Australian apple industry, it would be reasonable to allow the same NZ apples into Alaska, if Alaska has no existing apple industry, that could be planted in ice/snow. The intended fulcrum for this balance is Common Sense. Unfortunately at this time, in Australia, common sense

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has been replaced by that of politics. As we know, politics doesn't always represent common sense. The large Star of the Australian flag represents that of the Common wealth. Common wealth cannot happen, as our forefathers intended, without the principals of common sense. I believe, there is an obligation, to fulfil the inner confines of that large star, that sits, below the Union Jack. An obligation, which can only come from... Canberra tables...

However, as in our case with taro, and displayed in other industries, if the current situation continues, then any risk Assessment/ Industry Biosecurity Planning framework is severely compromised, being merely a band-aid solution, to an ongoing problem. Agricultural sector would have to be on a high risk 'Biosecurity Alert' which is basically, a 'biological means' of using weapons of mass destruction,. The only effective way to manage such an overwhelming situation, is to treat it as such, though an entirely different field. It would however, may necessitate such action, to bring Import Risk Assessment's to an acceptable level of monitoring, that could be *reasonably* and *effectively* addressed by a framework, such as this one (Industry Biosecurity Planning) being proposed.

To alternately place the burgeoning onus of biosecurity measures, awareness and expense, as an additional criteria, amongst the farming sector, is an extreme failing of 'duty of care' by the federal government. To place the onus of Industry Biosecurity/Contingency Planning for other than, an acceptable element of risk, to the goodwill of peak industry associations, because of federal political interests, is another extreme failure to the 'duty of care' by the federal government. Having politics allowing in import risks, and industry bodies having to prepare for outbreaks, is unsustainable agriculture, in all areas, environmentally, ethically and economically.

Unless the current policies of AQIS and Biosecurity Australia is revised, restructured or preferably vaporised, and active commonsense principles behind SPS Guidelines and industry bodies (PHA, CRC Plant Biosecurity) are put in it's place, and the framework of AQIS/PHA/DPI is restructured, I believe any steps or plans, no matter how well intentioned, are tragically, a lost cause.

Sadly, is that well intentioned industry bodies, such as PHA,CRC Plant Biosecurity, get tarnished with the same brush as the perpetrators of Federal policy. Many farmers will not see the overall picture, thus believe that one govt dept (AQIS) lets in biosecurity threats so that another govt umbrella (PHA/DPI) is employed to contain these threats, both have the benefits of job security, yet at the great expense of the farming livelihoods. The disturbing thing is, that the frontline public servant personnel face the brunt of dissent, while Federal policy sits back 'scot free'. Any dissention is relieved off Federal hands, having successfully

plotted one innocent party against another. The resultant outcomes of this, is similar to the plight of the Aboriginal, whereby, on the development of a crisis, the Federal govt steps in, under the guise of addressing civil disorder, and will again exercise it's rights, of invasive 'draconian' control. Worse still, this has already happened to farmers affected by quarantine measures, such as citrus canker etc ...without the civil disorder.

Everybody loses.....

The need for the farmer to protect their industry , from government policy, is a crime against humanity. If it is said, the children are our future, then it could also be said, it is that, the farmers that provide for that future. From this, it can be considered, that farmers must be, the backbone ...of any future ...of any nation.

The role of politics, should be to offer support, not for the role of PHA being the doctors and nurses, to the agricultural sector, caused by the carnage, of drunken political madness.

END

Anyways, to cut a long story short, all these notes we were going to use at the meeting,ended up in the hands of PHA ! We then heard from Ryan of PHA who asked if it was okay to circulate some of it. A selection of our summary (Question 4) was included in the agenda for meeting, and sent out to the participants beforehand, being PHA, State and Territory Biosecurity/Plant Health officers and reps from the olive and green tea industries.

However, we lost out, on our free trip to Canberra, as it appears, PHA wisely decided, that it would be safer if TGA was some 4,000kms away... We'd probably have them all ...madly thumping ..the tables of Canberra.... blowing out windows ... and raising clouds of termites, that would most likely ...descend onthe unsuspecting olive and green tea growers. That would be no way to conduct a meeting onaddressing biosecurity incursions!

Now it looked like, we're stuck on the end, of a teleconferencing phone.. ...for all our crimes.!

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As it was, it was just as well we sent the written submission, as the meeting was delayed and condensed in just over 3 hrs of discussion.

Those of us teleconferencing, missed most of what was being said. From all the crackle, I think AQIS not only allowed the termites to infiltrate Canberra teleconferencing lines, but also allowed them to carry off with the microphone amplifiers as well !!

We were given a background on the existing principles of Biosecurity Planning Arrangements for the large industries, and looked at what differed for minor or emerging industries that needed adapting for this framework.

When we mentioned the biosecurity risk of imported propagative taro available at the markets, allowed in by AQIS, against it's own Import conditions, and the NT taro, there was a huge outcry. The State and Territory DPI people said AQIS is making a "mockery of the whole biosecurity issue in Australia, we might as well pack up and go home." (AQIS ,BA and Stuart Smith were invited, but were, noticeably... not present !!) PHA said it was powerless and could only make recommendations, but in the end it was up to AQIS. It was agreed PHA needed to have more, than an advisory role, and needed to have a key control on what was allowed into the country, but how could we make it happen??

Anyways, this was the only time there was enough raised voices.... that we could all hear !!!

One of the more serious things (for us) that was briefly mentioned was the 'Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed' . We'll devote some discussion on this as it opens up interesting can of worms.

This is a legal and binding document, that overrides all previous biosecurity agreements. It is signed by most of the major crop plant industries, as a partnership between that particular industry and government. Naturally there are the benefits to that industry and it's

growers, by signing it.

However, there is one small clause, which states '**Government may eradicate pests where an industry is less than \$20 million at the farm gate**' Any major industry wouldn't give this much thought as they're worth over this threshold and the way this clause is worded, gives the impression, the government would act responsibly in this situation. Of course, they (the signees) also wouldn't want to lose the benefits received, just because of this 'small' clause.

What it is, is that it hands over any minor industry ownership, to the government, which could then choose, to ignore any quarantine/biosecurity issues, (as in our case) thus allow any pest or disease to intentionally wipe out that minor industry.

It doesn't matter if the Grain growers, Cane growers, Banana growers (or whoever has signed it protests), because the government will simply say "You've signed away your right, to have any decision or say, in the matter"

This is why our Taro Import issues, the NT taro quarantine has been ignored. The federal government has invoked and exercised it's authority, under this Deed, and intentionally allowed the import threat, of pest and disease, with the sole purpose, to wipe us out!!!

The trouble is, pest/disease such as taro beetle, is transferable to the major industries, which also blows a hole, in this little scheme.

It doesn't end here though. ... If the federal government has shown it's true intentions with taro, then what's the recourse for others? ..

There's got to be a few more ...jagged little pills.... that, we can cram down the throats, of government...

What it also means is, any emerging industries,

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such as fruit trees i.e. mangosteens, rambutans etc may spend, say \$2 billion (or any amount) in infrastructure, specialised machinery, packing sheds, wages, expertise etc while waiting the 8 years for an income. Regardless of these costs and investment, if the threshold is under \$20 million at the gate, the government could step back and allow imported pest/disease to annihilate those crops. There's no industry protection!

Or as with the coffegrowers in the Tablelands, they can walk in under the excuse of biosecurity measures, and nuke to death, every productive plant owned, regardless of rhyme or reason, against any recommendations put forward by industry bodies.

Under this, any future emerging industries, despite the potential of growing into a large industry, is threatened by this clause.

Under this any minor 'niche' industry is continuously, under threat by this clause.

Under this, any major industry that suffers loss through drought, cyclones, floods etc and falls under this threshold, is again subject, to perils of this clause.

Under this, what is the future, if the current market demands, of traditional industries change?

There is no \$\$\$dollar value threshold put on the principles, of the internationally accepted WTO SPS Guidelines, whereby "*The Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement establishes rules that give countries the right to give priority to protecting human, animal or plant health over trade.*" ..quoted by Gretchen Stanton of WTO, speaking in Canberra 2003, featured in Biosecurity Australia News: Nov 2003 Issue 14.

In Australia, we don't have those rights...

We don't have the rightto make a living.

What the government is doing to the taro industry, is more than bureaucratic bungling. *It is now a case, of a premeditated and deliberate intention, of 'agricultural genocide' of a minor industry, and in my book, will only be read, said, viewed, treated and delivered, as such. Book shut ...and case closed....*

What are you going to say ...to thatMr Government???

It is no wonder, Dr Haneef was greeted as a 'hero' upon return to India. He has survived, the 'terrorist' clutches, of Australian Federal politics.

Bah....

Well, that's it folks... Issue 13 on 13 pages..can't get any more luck than that!!

See ya

Sam...

(Sam Phillips)
Secretary
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