

WEEDS AS QUARANTINE PESTS

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Summary The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) is the Commonwealth agency responsible for implementing the Commonwealth government's quarantine policy with respect to plants and animals. AQIS regulates the importation of new plant species, following a decision-making policy consistent with relevant international treaties. In summary these agreements mean that only plants which do not occur in Australia, and which are assessed to be economically important quarantine pests, can be prohibited from importation. Proposed plant imports are assessed *inter alia* for weed potential before they are permitted entry. Developments regarding this aspect of quarantine policy are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The use of measures to restrict the movement of 'weed' plants, both into Australia and within Australia, due to the quarantine risks they pose must conform with international treaties. At the conclusion of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1994, member nations decided that specific agreements were necessary to stop countries erecting technical barriers to trade to compensate for the proposed removal of tariffs. Australia, as a member of the Cairns group, was a strong proponent of this initiative. One of these agreements, the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (the SPS agreement), includes measures to protect human, animal or plant life or health from risks arising from quarantine pests (WTO 1994). The SPS agreement fully supports the International Plant Protection Convention of 1951 (IPPC), which deals specifically with plant quarantine issues. The term 'pests' is generally held to include 'weeds'.

A 'quarantine pest' is defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as 'A pest of potential economic importance to the area endangered thereby and not yet present there or present but not widely distributed and being officially controlled' (FAO 1990).

DISCUSSION

International treaties The SPS agreement came into force for developed countries with the formation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) on 1 January 1995. This agreement was motivated by a concern that unless clear rules were made in the area of phytosanitary measures, gains achieved in the negotiations concerning

agricultural trade would be eroded by the imposition of additional and unjustified restrictions in the form of sanitary and phytosanitary barriers.

The SPS agreement imposes disciplines on the actions taken by national governments to prevent the importation of plants. These actions have to be based on scientifically assessed pest risks, where these risks are considered to be economically significant. Government's SPS decision processes must be transparent, i.e. is clearly stated and open to external scrutiny, if requested. National governments are ultimately responsible for compliance with the SPS agreement and should take positive steps to support its observance by lower levels of government, where measures that restrict the movement of plants within a country may affect international trade.

The agreement also requires WTO members to base SPS measures on 'international standards, guidelines or recommendations'. The IPPC Secretariat has been recognised by the WTO as the body best placed to coordinate phytosanitary standards development. AQIS has been an active participant in the lead up to the current activity and considers that its decision making process is consistent with the developing standards (WTO 1994).

Legislative controls AQIS is the Commonwealth agency implementing the government's quarantine policy with respect to plants. Under the *Quarantine Act 1908* AQIS is empowered to regulate the importation of all types of plant material into Australia. This act does not differentiate between plant end usages.

AQIS currently prohibits the entry, due to weed risk of; 66 species and 19 genera from several families, 213 species from the genus *Acacia* and 106 genera from the family Cactaceae, by proclamations 86P, 96P and 58P, respectively. Further species are prohibited as they are assessed by the method explained in the next section.

While measures to protect the environment are not directly referred to in the SPS agreement, they are canvassed in supporting texts to the agreement. The FAO definition of a quarantine pest does not specify whether the economic impact of the pest is on agriculture, public lands or forests and so does not differentiate between weeds of agriculture or the broader environment. The Australian Nature Conservation Agency (ANCA) is the agency with administrative responsibility to restrict plant imports under the *Wildlife Protection (Regulation of*

Exports and Imports) Act 1982. AQIS and ANCA are involved in discussions on this area, and currently cooperate on assessments.

Quarantine pest AQIS carries out assessments for weed potential on all proposed plant introductions, for species not already listed in its Quarantine manual. If a species is excluded, due to weed potential, actions taken must also be consistent with the standards and international obligations. AQIS considers these assessments are consistent with international requirements, in that they scientifically determine pest risk and they are transparent.

A flow chart (Figure 1), extracted from a draft pest risk analysis (PRA) standard (FAO 1995), demonstrates the criteria used in determining whether an organism should be assessed as a potential quarantine pest. The first significant question is presence or absence in the country or area of interest. If the pest is not present and could become established and be of economic importance once established the risk of it entering the country should be evaluated. In the case of a proposed plant importation, introduction potential is considered 100%. If it is already present in the country then it can only be further evaluated if it is of limited distribution and under official control. There is no justification in preventing further entry

of the same species if it is already widespread, unless the new entry is clearly different in weed risk status from the plants already found. An example of this would be the importation of a fertile member of what had been a sterile species. If the species is found in a limited area, but is not under official control, then it can not be prevented entry. If the species is the subject of official government control, this is defined as (FAO 1990), ‘including suppression, containment or eradication of pest population... by a national protection organization’ then prevention of further entry of the plant is justified and the risk of it entering the country should be evaluated.

Evaluating the introduction potential of plant species requires assessment of all potential pathways. Where there is a significant risk of introducing a weed species as a contaminant through trade, i.e. bulk grain imports, AQIS will implement appropriate risk management practices.

AQIS plant assessment Assessments of weed potential of proposed plant imports are currently carried out by AQIS staff using a system endorsed by the Australian Weeds Committee. Following public consultation AQIS intends to adopt the Weed Risk Assessment system (Pheloung 1996). To facilitate the use of this system a client questionnaire has been developed which increases the information provided by potential plant importers to AQIS, as well as raising their awareness to the issue of potential risks of plant importation.

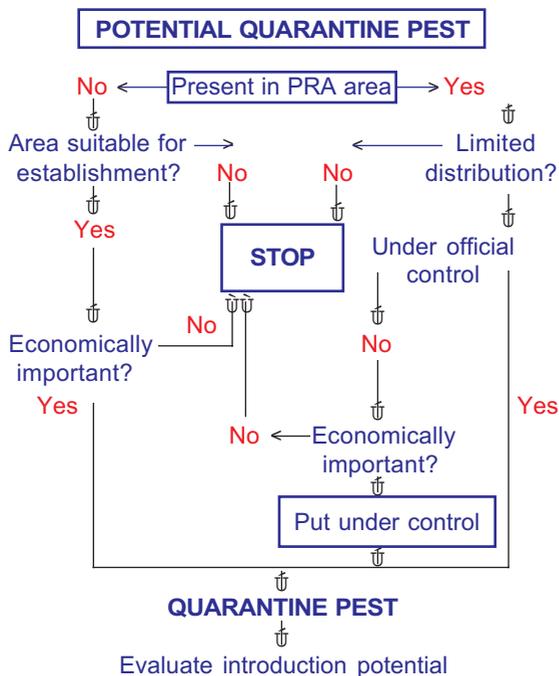


Figure 1. Assessing the Quarantine Pest Risk. Stage 2 of the FAO draft PRA standard (FAO 1995).

REFERENCES

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