

Committee Secretary Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
PO Box 6100 Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600 Australia

Re: Inquiry into biosecurity and quarantine arrangements

Dear Committee Secretary

The Riverina citrus industry is Australia's largest citrus growing region, producing approximately 30% of Australia's citrus products, creating 1,500 jobs with 8,500 hectares of orchards over 690 farms. There are over 400 jobs in packing sheds, 200 in the juicing plus more throughout the supply chain and at retail level.

Riverina Citrus represents citrus growers and would like to take this opportunity to highlight for the committee biosecurity issues in relation to Huanglongbing (HLB) which is a devastating disease of citrus and a threat to Australian citrus production. The threat posed to our industry by this disease relates directly to the practices and procedures surrounding biosecurity in Australia.

The impacts of this disease on Australian citrus production would be disastrous and have severe economic, social and environmental effects, felt regionally and nationally.

Committee Terms of Reference

a) the adequacy of current biosecurity and quarantine arrangements, including resourcing; b) projected demand and resourcing requirements; c) progress toward achievement of reform of Australian Quarantine and Inspection service export fees and charges; d) progress in implementation of the 'Beale Review' recommendations and their place in meeting projected biosecurity demand and resourcing; and e) any related matters.

Riverina Citrus believes that this submission relates directly to a), b), c) and e) of the Committee's Terms of Reference.

#### HUANGLONGBING – A DEVASTATING DISEASE OF CITRUS AND A THREAT TO AUSTRALIAN CITRUS PRODUCTION

Huanglongbing (HLB), also known as Citrus Greening, is a bacterial plant disease that – while not harmful to human health – destroys the production, appearance and economic value of citrus trees and the taste of the fruit and juice.

It is the most serious citrus disease worldwide and once a tree is infected, there is no cure. Diseased trees produce bitter, inedible, misshapen fruit and eventually die.

HLB occurs throughout Asia, and parts of Africa and the Americas. The citrus industries in Florida and Brazil are now in rapid decline, while their production costs in an effort to suppress the disease, have risen >40%. In Florida 244,000 acres of citrus have been abandoned, in large measure due to HLB.

Orange production has decreased by a third and grapefruit production by half in Florida since the disease appeared in 2005. The long term forecasts by FDOC are even more disturbing showing that the decrease will continue unless a remedy is found quickly (FruiTrop 179, June 2010, p. 39).

The psyllid vector of HLB is now present in California and the risk of HLB is very high.

HLB can be spread by grafting infected plant tissue onto another plant, but it is more likely to be moved around by infected insects (citrus psyllids). Once the Asian Citrus Psyllid (*Diaphorina citri*) picks up the disease, it carries it for the rest of its life (weeks to months), spreading it from tree to tree as it feeds.

Orange jasmine is a favoured host of the vector and can be infected with HLB.

HLB and its vector represent significant threats to commercial citrus production in Australia and to the six species of Citrus that are native to Australia, including the desert lime and finger limes.

The vulnerability to the citrus industry Australia-wide derives from:  
Australia's proximity to the islands of the Indonesian archipelago and to Papua New Guinea where both HLB and *D. citri* are endemic;  
the continuity of indigenous citrus around the Australian coastline;  
the widespread occurrence of orange jasmine, *Murraya* sp., in gardens; and its wild forms in thickets in Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland;  
all species and varieties of Citrus are likely to be susceptible to HLB;  
all citrus producing regions of Australia having climates that are favourable for HLB and its vector.

The most likely pathways of entry of HLB and its vectors are:

illegal introductions of budwood from South Africa, Brazil, Asia or Florida by growers seeking to gain advantage through new or improved varieties;  
householders illegally importing budwood or cuttings from trees owned by friends or relatives in countries where HLB occurs;  
legal importation of infested or infected material that has been inadequately tested or treated and inspected;  
passive transport of adult psyllids, which are strongly attracted to light, in commercial and military aircraft;  
air movements (e.g., cyclonic and jet streams) carrying psyllids from areas where HLB and *D. citri* occur e.g., the Indonesian archipelago and New Guinea;  
movement of people carrying citrus fruits and other plant material across the Torres Strait from Papua New Guinea, principally by sea; and  
unregulated landings of boats carrying citrus from other areas to the north of Australia.

As an incursion by HLB and/or its vector is probably inevitable, Australia needs to be prepared.

Successful eradication will depend on a quick and decisive response.

The Asian citrus psyllid has been eradicated once before in Australia (in the Northern Territory in the 1920's, through the destruction of all citrus trees). We believe the vector of HLB, the Asian Citrus Psyllid (ACP) is a dangerous threat even in the absence of the disease.

Regions of the world, such as Florida, that are now suffering from HLB were originally invaded by ACP. Insufficient effort was made at eradicating the psyllid when it first arrived because the pathogen was not also present. When HLB later arrived, the psyllid was already distributed throughout the region making eradication improbable/impossible. Vectors of devastating diseases should be categorized at the same level as the disease they transmit for efficient and economical incursion management to occur. The Asian Citrus Psyllid, should be given the higher status of risk, Category 2.

A Pest Specific Contingency Plan funded by the citrus industry has been formulated and is being continually updated as new information becomes available. A HLB Task Force of industry, state and federal representatives meets regularly by teleconference.

We believe that current biosecurity and quarantine arrangements, including resourcing are inadequate to meet the threat of HLB and the Asian citrus psyllid to Australian citriculture. More needs to be done if we are to meet the challenge.

Pre-incursion requirements should include:

a whole-of-supply-chain economic impact analysis to define how HLB will impact the operating and consuming environment for citrus in Australia; estimate the multiplier effects of HLB from the citrus economy to the regional, state or national economies more generally through supplier, retailer and tertiary service businesses; and provide easily-communicated, yet quantitative estimates of the nature and magnitude of the economic effects of HLB should an incursion occur in Australia;

effective avenues for ensuring industry and public awareness of the dangers posed by illegal introductions of plant material;

The Asian Citrus Psyllid should be classified as a category 2 exotic pest;

effective avenues for ensuring recognition of adult and immature stages of *D. citri* by the general public;

production and dissemination of resource material on HLB and its vectors should be co-ordinated between the states, OCPPO, PHA and industry and should be targeted at citrus nurserymen, growers, consultants and others and should be informative, without being too technical;

co-ordinated surveillance by state authorities and industry for incursions, including maintenance of current NAQS and QDPI activities in northern Australia, and establishment of surveillance programs for nurseries, orchards, urban areas and areas, where native or naturalised hosts of HLB and its vectors occur;

mandatory certification of all budwood and seed used by citrus nurserymen;

a process implemented and supported by legislation, that ensures those involved in the

nursery industry (and especially those growing Citrus and Citrus relatives, and Murraya) are identified and address details are current; this must include producers and sellers at 'flea market' retail outlets;  
a Plant Health Australia schedule of owner reimbursement costs that reflects current costs, and is tailored to different varieties, production areas and tree age, accepted by the Australian citrus industry;  
prohibition of imports of fresh kaffir lime leaves from any country/state with HLB and Asian citrus psyllid;  
continual updating of ICON (AQIS import conditions) in light of changes to the systematics and nomenclature of the Rutaceae, and for hosts of HLB and the citrus psyllid;  
completion of the HLB and psyllid diagnostic protocols;  
legislation in place in all states to enable mandatory destruction of abandoned orchards within quarantine zones, without the need to determine the presence of HLB or its vectors.

#### Current AQIS fees and arrangements

Citrus growers in the Riverina are recognised as amongst the most efficient in the world. They receive no subsidies and compete in a world market dominated by countries with low labour costs and minimal institutional charges. Australia pays high wages; businesses pay relatively high interest rates and taxes and exports are burdened by a high dollar and expensive inspection charges.

Exporters have no say in the charges levied by AQIS and there is no attempt to justify escalating fees. Many farmers and exporters are beginning to ask why compliance tasks undertaken by AQIS shouldn't be scrutinised and open to tender.

If government expects 'User Pays' from exporters, surely there should be an expectation that their services are open to competition? Perhaps the future is a range of private compliance providers that are accredited by DAFF for example.

If the citrus industry doesn't challenge the charges levied on them, they will continue to struggle against competitors who do not face the same fees and charges in relation to quarantine and biosecurity arrangements.

Much of the work done by AQIS is administrative in nature and does not require specialist skills yet citrus growers pay commercial hourly rates for activities by AQIS- often for work that does not justify the significant expense.

Riverina Citrus believes that the fees and charges currently levied by AQIS must be urgently reviewed and a more modern, competitive and justified pricing arrangement put into place.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for reviewing this submission and trust that it has been a valuable contribution to your deliberations.

If you require any further information, or would like a representative from Riverina Citrus to appear at any hearing in relation to the Inquiry please contact our office on the number below.

Yours sincerely

Scot MacDonald  
Executive Officer  
Riverina Citrus