



Natural
Resources
Commission

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

Submission to inquiry into Biosecurity Bill 2014

The New South Wales Natural Resources Commission (NRC) has prepared this submission in response to the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee inquiry into the Biosecurity Bill 2014 (the Bill).

In May 2014 the NRC finalised an independent review of the effectiveness and efficiency of weed management arrangements in New South Wales in response to a terms of reference from the New South Wales Minister for Primary Industries. Therefore, the NRC's comments have a particular focus on weed management.

New arrangements need to provide sufficient resources and improved response to the biosecurity risk posed by invasive species. Weeds are estimated to cost the New South Wales economy almost \$2 billion annually. This does not include the economic value of the substantial social and environmental impacts.

The NRC supports the efforts to modernise current biosecurity legislation and cut red-tape. However, the NRC has concerns, in particular in regards to active surveillance, harmonisation of biosecurity systems across Australia and provisions for responding to invasive species.

It is understood that the intent may be to address some of these issues further through regulations to support the Bill and/or through revisions and development of intergovernmental arrangements. The suggestions made in this submission are intended to inform development of such supporting materials and arrangements in addition to the Bill itself.

Surveillance

Prevention is far more cost effective than attempting to control invasive species once they are already established. The Bill provides for strong quarantine arrangements to try to prevent new diseases and pests from entering Australia. However, national quarantine services will never be 100 per cent effective and many invasive species and future threats are already here.

Response measures provided in the Bill rely on investigating an identified potential risk, but it is not clear how that potential risk would be identified. Adequately resourced and robust active surveillance is needed to ensure new incursions are quickly detected and addressed. The Beale Review¹ recommended that the Commonwealth "establish a comprehensive monitoring and

¹ Beale, R, Fairbrother, J, Inglis, A and Trebeck, D, 2008, *One Biosecurity: A working partnership, The Independent Review of Australia's Quarantine and Biosecurity Arrangements*, Report to the Australian Government, Canberra.

surveillance program for national priority exotic pests and diseases – covering terrestrial and aquatic environments as well as traditional agriculture. The design of the program should reflect the risk pathways and probability of occurrence to ensure early detection.”

Such a program could be developed through an intergovernmental agreement as allowed for under the Bill, but would require sufficient resourcing to ensure that it is effective. In regards to invasive species, the Commonwealth should support devolved, regionalised arrangements that have sufficient funds to tackle the new incursions expeditiously and seriously. These arrangements should be consistent across Australia with strong data sharing arrangements to support rapid response.

Rapid response

Rapid response to identified incursions is the key to eradication. Current systems are often too slow to allow response in time to ensure eradication of invasive species incursions. Improved coordination of funding and clarification of roles and responsibilities at each scale are needed.

There are barriers to timely and effective response to weed incursions under the National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement (NEBRA). Stakeholders report that rapid responses to contain new incursions are hindered by funding not being readily available, the need for consensus, and the high level of certainty required about both the extent of the incursion and the feasibility of eradication before acting.

Under current agreements responses to incursions that impact on the environment and on industry are separated. Invasive species do not recognise fences or boundaries. Many invasive species affect both production and the environment and coordinated responses and funding are needed.

Harmonisation of biosecurity programs

The Beale review also highlighted the fragmented nature of biosecurity arrangements within Australia. The Bill provides for the Commonwealth to respond to on-shore biosecurity risks, thereby allowing it to address the full continuum of biosecurity management. However, it is not clear when or if the Commonwealth would choose to use the powers provided, or what the roles and responsibilities of the States and territories versus the Commonwealth are in regards to post-border activities.

In regards to weeds, there is a need for stronger coordination of weed management at the national level. The Australian Weed Committee has produced strategies and agreements, but more actions need to be implemented including:

- establish agreed upon nationwide data protocols and sharing systems
- coordinate alignment of listings (such as noxious weeds lists) between all States and Territories
- coordinate alignment of programs to control cross-border commodities that create invasive species risks to the environment
- develop a central rapid response fund so that incursions can be immediately eradicated
- identify where shared resources are more efficient and effective such as shared services for plant identification.

Commonwealth funding can also be better aligned with state and regional needs and priorities. In some cases Commonwealth funds have been provided to address particular weeds that are not a regional priority, while the priority weeds continued to expand and cause extensive damage.

Assessing the risk of invasive species

The explanatory memo accompanying the Bill indicates resources will be applied to the highest risks. The details of risk assessment processes are deferred to the regulations. In the case of invasive species, there is often insufficient information to perform an accurate quantitative risk-assessment. Further, risks and impacts to the environment can be difficult, if not impossible, to quantify in economic terms. Given the limitations of quantitative risk assessment, a range of experts should be involved in evaluating outcomes and deliberating responses.

The unique nature of biosecurity risks should be considered in designing any risk assessment process so that long-term impacts are properly evaluated. It may be difficult to assess long-term risks of invasive species relative to emergencies such as disease outbreaks. Animal disease is potentially frightening, and is often characterised by lasting images of animal suffering and slaughter. By comparison, similar images cannot be conjured about weeds. Their influence is much more insidious; but the costs, which go on year after year, decade after decade, are also huge.

Yours sincerely

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Commissioner

Cc: The Hon. Katrina Hodgkinson MP, Minister for Primary Industries