



## **Appendix E-Articles which appeared in *About the House***

July/August 2002 Edition

### **Tasmania warns about more trade disputes**

The Tasmanian government has warned a federal parliamentary inquiry that Australia could face more trade disputes like the one on importation of salmon unless quarantine risk assessments are adapted to take account of regional differences in Australia.

The warning comes in the Tasmanian government's submission to federal parliament's Public Accounts and Audit Committee, which is reviewing Australia's quarantine operations.

The Tasmanian government says it has been pressing the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (AFFA) to adapt quarantine measures to regional conditions, but has not been successful to date. This is despite that fact that adaptation of quarantine measures is provided for under the World Trade Organisation's Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement.

"Refusal on the part of AFFA to utilise these globally accepted principles of risk management is scientifically unsound," says the Tasmanian government. "In the case of salmon, this has resulted in costly and protracted dispute both within Australia and between Australia and Canada in the WTO's dispute resolution forum.

"There is little doubt that similar costly and protracted disputes will continue to occur if AFFA does not implement the principle of adaptation of

quarantine measures to regional conditions in its IRA [Import Risk Analysis] process.”

The Public Accounts and Audit Committee inquiry was prompted by a report from the Auditor-General, which found that high proportions of material posing a quarantine risk were escaping detection in the mail and at international airports. Performance in detecting such material was found to vary from airport to airport.

In its submission to the inquiry, the Australian pork industry's peak national body expresses concern that overseas certification of goods for import is not always carried out according to the required protocols. Australian Pork Limited cites the example of timber being imported into Australia, stating: “AFFA has been aware that fumigation certificates are not reliable, with live pests frequently discovered on shipments of timber certified as fumigated.

“Such a situation reflects a difference from what is the actual level of protection provided to Australia by overseas export inspection services and what has been accounted for in theory,” says Australian Pork.

The submission emphasises the importance of international cooperation to stop the spread of disease. As an example, Australian Pork commends AFFA for its work on the Nipah virus in Indonesia (a virus transmitted by pigs that can cause death in humans and pigs).

Australian Pork calls for increased overseas training, technical assistance surveys, research and inspections, as well as networking with officials and experts in origin areas of risk. It also wants greater access to information about international veterinary services, saying that previous assumptions about the adequacy of other countries' veterinary services have not always proved correct.

Public hearings on the quarantine inquiry are due to commence in July.

September/October 2002 Edition

## On the Quarantine Frontline

*We hear plenty, and rightly so, of the efforts of our defence force troops in East Timor, Afghanistan and other parts of the world. We don't hear much, however, of the efforts of a group of lower profile but very important 'troops' also operating on and to the north of Australia's borders - the people implementing the Northern Australian Quarantine Strategy. About the House travelled with parliament's Public Accounts Committee to investigate.*

Screw-worm fly. Mango pulp weevil. Melon and papaya fruit fly. Asian honey bee. Giant African snails. Rabies. Dengue fever. Japanese encephalitis. Foot and mouth disease.

All lurking just to our north in south-east Asia, along with an array of other diseases, pests and weeds. Posing multi-million dollar threats to livestock, crops, native flora and fauna, tourism and public health, many of these nasties are on the march southwards.

Standing in their way is a team from the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service (AQIS); staff of the *Northern Australian Quarantine Strategy* (NAQS).

NAQS is a three-pronged strategy operating right across the top of Australia (and further north in neighbouring countries), from Broome in the west to Cairns in the east.

It combines border controls, scientific research and public awareness to protect Australia's environment, agricultural and horticultural industries, and animal, plant and human health.

The NAQS team - some 31 operational and 20 scientific staff - has a particular focus on improving the integrity of the quarantine border in the Torres Strait and on Cape York Peninsula, the closest parts of Australia to any other nation.

In fact, it's difficult to appreciate just how close Australia is to Papua New Guinea (PNG) until you're there.

Looking across the five-kilometre stretch of water between the Australian Torres Strait island of Saibai and the Western Province of PNG, it's as if you could throw a stone across. You can certainly navigate a boat across. In fact, you can travel right around the Torres Strait islands by small boat. The dinghy or tinny is known as the "Torres Strait ute", and the approximately 100 islands of Torres Strait provide stepping stones to the Australian mainland (it is 160 kilometres from PNG to the tip of Cape York).

This geographic proximity presents a challenge, with the ever-present danger of pests and diseases present in PNG moving across, either on the wind (mosquitos can be carried hundreds of kilometres), within foods or food scraps, within traded goods, on animals, soil or on people.

The 1985 Torres Strait Treaty allows free movement of traditional peoples from the Western Province of PNG in and out of the Torres Strait Protected Zone. In 2000-2001 there were some 2700 such movements. There is a list of items that can and cannot be traded, and large shore-side signs clearly illustrate this.

The potential threat posed by that traditional movement is increasing with the escalating movement eastwards of people, animals and goods within Indonesia, and in particular the establishment of significant cattle populations on islands of eastern Indonesia. Additional dangers are also being posed now by increases in illegal fishing and illegal immigration, and also international yachting. All have the potential to inadvertently introduce pests or spread diseases.

[A man, believed to be Indonesian, was recently found on Masig (Yorke) Island in middle of Torres Strait, where he was nabbed by the local Quarantine officer, Hilda Mosby. He had sailed from the PNG island of Daru in a home-made vessel, which remains beached on Masig.]

The potential damage from such incursions is enormous; at risk are billions of dollars of horticultural and agricultural industries, as well as public health. This is why quarantine is so important, and why it received its share of an extra \$600 million granted to border agencies in the 2001/2002 federal budget. It is Australia's quarantine function – one arm of which is the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy – that is being scrutinised by the Public Accounts and Audit Committee.

So, how does the NAQS system operate?

NAQS is tasked with identifying quarantine risks to northern Australia, and providing early warning of quarantine pest incursions.

First, risk analysis is conducted to identify the pest and disease risks which exist in the region. Scientists are sent into the field within Australia and our near neighbours. From this research and analysis a disease and pest target list is created.

Ongoing monitoring and surveillance strategies and control programs are then developed and implemented.

Monitoring occurs in northern Australia, and off-shore, in PNG, East Timor and other nations, under special memoranda of understanding. Methods of

monitoring include establishing 'sentinel' herds of cattle and pigs, which are bled regularly to check for blood-borne diseases; trapping wild birds for similar testing; trapping flies and other insects, such as mosquitos; visiting and testing commercial and domestic animal herds; and targeting and autopsying animals.

The frequency with which animals and traps are checked depends on the risk level assigned to the area; NAQS breaks its area of operations into five different risk zones, from very high to very low.

Survey frequencies are graded accordingly, from once every five years for the very low risk zones to two or more times a year for the very high risk zones. These are usually general surveys of cultivated and naturalised plants and domestic animals, with particular emphasis on target organisms.

High risk areas also include ports where goods are unloaded. All containers entering from identified risk areas are now cleaned externally, and those from high-risk areas are also cleaned internally.

The giant African snail is often found in containers unloaded in Townsville and Darwin, but so far has not been found in Cairns.

"I've been looking for giant African snails for 10 years, and never found one," the hose operator told *About the House*. "I tell you what I have found though. Cats. The silly buggers at the other end sometimes throw cats into the containers. They think it's funny. I can tell you it's not. Those things can carry all sorts of bugs and diseases."

Two weeks after the committee's visit, a black-spined toad was found aboard a bulk carrier from east Indonesia. The toxic cousin of the cane toad, the black-spined toad is known as an explosive breeder with a talent for establishing in new environments.

Also trapped at Cairns seaport was an Asian tiger mosquito. This mosquito poses a significant public health threat. It carries dengue fever, can out-compete all native mosquito species, and is capable of living in cooler climates – meaning it could easily spread south into NSW if it enters unchecked. The mosquito caught in the trap at Cairns port is believed to have arrived via a cargo vessel from Indonesia.

An enhanced surveillance program was put into place at the docks once the mosquito was discovered in the daily checking of the traps. Similar checking by local quarantine officers goes on every day in high-risk areas, such as Saibai, where Ron Enosa also carries out dinghy surveillance and cargo inspection, and issues animal permits.

NAQS operations and scientific officers conduct regular 'extension' activities in neighbouring countries.

NAQS officer Peter Pederson, who briefed the committee in Cairns (turning at least one committee member squeamish with some graphic descriptions and a colourful slide show) is currently on a six-month posting in East Timor.

Mr Pederson is helping to set up a quarantine service in East Timor, which will protect both Australia and our close neighbour from exotic pests present in other nearby countries. For his first month, he was living in a modified shipping container.

The third aspect of NAQS is public awareness.

NAQS staff regularly make quarantine awareness presentations to schools, communities, rangers, police, health workers, commercial fishermen, tour operators and pastoralists. They are also involved in regular radio broadcasts on quarantine issues, maintain an FM radio network at six strategic locations in Cape York Peninsula, and an extensive system of signage throughout the Torres Strait and Peninsula area.

Shayne Ahboo is the NAQS operations coordinator for the Torres Strait area.

The 27-year-old Thursday Islander did all his schooling on the Island, before completing a Bachelor of Applied Science at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, majoring in biology and minoring in aquaculture.

"When I was at school, Quarantine used to be the popular work experience place to get into," Shayne says. "But I could never get in.

"Then at my second year at Uni I was a bit strapped for cash and was looking for ways to supplement my income. I won a cadetship with Quarantine, and things started from there. I liked the job, and I feel I'm doing something worthwhile."

To the outside observer, perhaps the most impressive thing about the whole program is its integration within the culture of the islands. Everybody seems to know about it; everybody is part of the 'Top Watch' team.

"Not only that," Shayne Ahboo says, "we have a full complement of indigenous staff here [21 Torres Strait islanders operate the service on the islands]. That helps us with getting out into the community. It's certainly paying dividends."

Certainly Shayne seems to know everybody in the Torres Strait.

When returning from the Torres Strait, the committee landed back in Cairns. Who was waiting? Quarantine. With a sniffer dog (one of 71 now in operation

at ports around Australia). Inquiry secretary John Carter was stopped, as was NAQS head Robert Murphy.

It turns out they had been carrying oranges in their bags several days before the inspection tour began, the scent of which the beagle was still able to sniff out.

"At least we know it's working," was Dr Carter's embarrassed comment. And Australia can be grateful for that.

September/October 2002 Edition

## **FIRE ANTS**

On 22 February last year Brisbane was invaded. Two outbreaks of red imported fire ants – an aggressive invader described by the Queensland Department of Primary Industry as “worse than the rabbit or the cane toad” – were discovered in different parts of Brisbane.

The red fire ant is a danger to local fauna and to Australian lifestyles. A prodigious spreader, it takes over backyards and community areas, rendering them unsafe for play or use. Once disturbed, swarms of fire ants will cover people or animals in moments. They then bite in unison, and repeatedly.

The fire ant also poses a huge threat to agriculture, with the potential to make arable land unusable. The estimated cost of a full-blown outbreak is more than \$8.9 billion over 30 years.

Fire ants travel by flight (up to two kilometres) or in soil. The first outbreak was discovered at the port of Brisbane; it has now been cleared up via an extensive eradication plan. The second outbreak was in Brisbane's western suburbs. Some 440 people are working on the ongoing \$145 million, three-year fire ant eradication program there. Disconcertingly, the two outbreaks were unrelated, the port outbreak being an ant from the USA, the suburban outbreak an Argentinian variety.

## Quarantine should get under water, inquiry told

AQIS's Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) should be armed with a marine unit, according to evidence given to the parliamentary inquiry into quarantine.

Speaking at a public hearing in Brisbane of the Public Accounts and Audit Committee inquiry, the Acting Chief Scientist (Waterways Scientific Services) of the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency, Pauline Semple, said that NAQS should have a marine module.

"I think a marine module would be an advantage because the marine issues are quite different from the land issues," Mrs Semple said.

"As someone said the other day, 'If you have some cattle with a disease, you can put a fence around them, but if you have exotic pests on the hull or you have ballast water pests, you cannot fence them in or control them'."

Severe dangers could be posed to Australian marine life and industries by exotic marine pests.

Mrs Semple said monitoring, preventing and controlling the entry of these marine pests should be a quarantine responsibility, as is the case with such pests above the waterline.

"I think it should be a quarantine function, but there is no reason why it could not be that the responsible person in quarantine links to the state agencies to get the expertise.

"Obviously, you do not need to have 10 people with the expertise waiting around for the next event," she said.

At the same hearing, Mrs Semple outlined frustrations she faced with the federal Department of Immigration (DIMIA) when trying to establish an interim protocol to deal with the quarantine threats posed by seized illegal vessels.

Protocols exist in Darwin, which ensure that no vessels coming from an international port, including suspected illegal entry vessels (SIEVs) and foreign fishing vessels (FFVs), can be docked in Darwin without first being inspected. Such a protocol does not exist in Queensland.

Mrs Semple said she had been trying for three months to have Immigration agree to an interim protocol for dealing with the quarantine aspects of seized illegal vessels being held in Queensland whilst a national protocol was developed, but with no response.



“I developed a draft protocol that I sent to Canberra in May as an interim arrangement,” Mrs Semple told the inquiry. “It is basically the same as the Northern Territory’s, except that it is relevant to Thursday Island and Cairns, which is where the vessels come in.

“I had a response from the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) saying that they were willing to cooperate and pay for the costs of inspection if I could organise divers to do that. The immigration department, after many phone calls and emails, have not responded.”

In later evidence responding to Mrs Semple’s claims, DIMIA told the committee, via AFFA, that the Queensland EPA had been contacted by phone, indicating a willingness to cooperate on developing the protocols.

Mrs Semple’s comments came after an outbreak of two marine pest organisms in Cairns’ Trinity Inlet, sourced from a detained vessel.

Early outbreaks of Caribbean tube worm and Asian green mussel were found in Trinity Inlet, but only by accident, as Mrs Semple explained.

“The two problems we have had in Trinity Inlet recently, in the last 12 months—the two pests we have had to eradicate—were both brought in by a detained vessel,” Mrs Semple said.

“It was detained by both DIMIA and AFMA. We are not quite sure of all the background to that; it is not public information. All we know is that it was under the control of those two agencies. But that vessel was the source of our problems in north Queensland.

“The first organism we found was the Caribbean tube worm. It was found accidentally by the Navy when they pulled out a couple of vessels that had come back from East Timor. The vessels had come back as what they call ‘cleanskins’, because they run them up onto the beach and take all the antifouling off the bottom.

“Those vessels were moored in Trinity Inlet for five months, just downstream of the particular vessel I mentioned earlier. When they were pulled out for cleaning and regular maintenance, they had two or three tonnes of tube worm— almost a monoculture—on the vessels.

“We thought at first that they may have picked it up in and brought it back from East Timor. However, we subsequently found the seized vessel covered in tube worm and we knew that that was the probable source of it.

“So it was found originally on three Navy vessels. In terms of eradicating it, we have looked all around Trinity Inlet. We found very small numbers in the most likely places. It had spread to about nine out of the 12 sites we inspected

but in very small numbers, so it is not competing well with the local species. Because it had spread widely, we do not believe that we can eradicate it by any kind of eradication process such as was used in Darwin [copper sulfate was used to eradicate a black striped mussel outbreak in an enclosed Darwin marina]. It is not practical there.

“The second organism was the Asian green mussel, which grows to about the distance between an index finger and thumb, as opposed to the little black striped mussel.

“Again, it is very aggressive. It has a much longer reproduction cycle and we have been able to find only juveniles. We have done very good searches of Trinity Inlet and looked in all the most likely places for establishment. The only specimens we have found—apart from on the original vessel, the source vessel—are, I think, 13 since November last year, and they were all juveniles, pre reproduction age. So we hope that with another 12 months of continued inspections we will get a clearance—that the inlet has been cleared of it.”

Mrs Semple said that she had also been in contact with AQIS about the vessel. AQIS had responded that “it is not their responsibility, that it is the responsibility of DIMIA and AFMA”.

The Public Accounts and Audit Committee is due to report the findings of its inquiry before the end of the year.