

Senate Rural Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Supplementary Budget Estimates October 2010

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Question: BSG/APLC 01

Division/Agency: Australian Plague Locust Commission

Topic: Locusts

Proof Hansard Page: Written

Senator Heffernan asked:

1. Can you give me an update on the current outlook for locusts, their likely impact in rural and regional Australia and any Nationally coordinated measures to manage any outbreak?
2. How is the department involved in the programme to eradicate locusts spreading all the way down to Victoria?
3. Has funding been provided to states/territories to assist them in eradicating locusts?
4. What programmes have been implemented (either by state or commonwealth depts) to control the spread of the locusts?
5. What is the current advice in relation to the spread of locusts?
6. What advice has the Department received in relation to the potential area spread of the locusts?
7. Has the department undertaken any work to determine the potential damage to our Agriculture sector as a result of the locusts?

Answer:

1. Large swarms of locusts were present over wide areas of NSW, Victoria and South Australia in autumn (April – May 2010), and established egg beds which have now hatched across those three states. Since early May 2010, the Australian Plague Locust Commission has led an extensive planning exercise to prepare all participating agencies, industry groups and individual landholders for the spring locust outbreak. The commission continues to provide updated information to state agencies and landholders to assist in their response efforts, while also commencing the implementation of its own response plan. Aerial surveillance has been commenced, and aircraft capacity and stocks of sufficient pesticides to treat the anticipated hatchings have been secured. The commission has also provided training to the state agencies to assist them in preparing for and implementing an efficient and effective response to the impending locust threat.
2. In addition to implementing its own planned aerial surveillance and control activities, the commission has remained engaged with agencies from all affected states to assist them with the implementation of an effective response to the spring locust threat. Well-defined areas of operation have been established between the commission and the states agencies to ensure effective coverage of infested areas. Resourcing of the response, including aircraft availability and pesticide supplies, has been addressed, with plans established for these agencies to collectively treat up to 2.5 million hectares of infestation. It is important to note that the control

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program being implemented by all parties (the commission, state agencies and landholders) is aimed at population management and damage mitigation, not pest eradication.

3. The commission is jointly funded by the Australian Government (50 per cent) and the state governments of NSW (32.5 per cent), Victoria (10 per cent), South Australia (5 per cent) and Queensland (2.5 per cent). The total budget for the commission in 2010-11 is \$4.8 million, which is an increase on previous years' funding. The commission also has a "reserve" fund currently holding some \$2.3 million, which can be accessed as required to supplement locust control activities once the annual allocation is exhausted. The affected states have allocated significant funds from within their own jurisdictional budgets to resource their own locust response activities. South Australia has allocated \$12.5 million, NSW has allocated some \$18 million while Victoria has nominally allocated up to \$42 million. In each case, a substantial part of these allocations are to provide pesticides or rebates to landholders who undertake locust control on their own properties. As the commission's surveillance, control, assistance and advice is applied in all affected states, the benefit of the collective investment in the commission is delivered to all of these states.
4. Extensive aerial surveillance and treatment has been and continues to be implemented across the affected areas. To 1 November 2010, over 10 million hectares have been subjected to aerial surveillance while some 250,000 hectares of high density infestation have been treated by the agencies collectively. Landholder treatment on-property has also been extensive. This surveillance and treatment program by the commission and the state agencies will continue while high-density locust nymph populations are present.
5. Spring locust hatchings have been observed and reported in all regions which were identified as "at risk" during the pre-season planning process. Extensive hatchings have occurred in areas of the NSW Central West, eastern Darling, Lachlan and Hume regions. High density hatchings are also anticipated to become evident in the Riverina region in the coming weeks. Only low density or isolated infestations have been observed in the Far Western region of NSW. High density hatchings have also become evident in areas of South Australia's Mid North region (eastern Flinders Ranges) and Riverland-Mallee region. Locust populations in the north-west of Victoria have also been extensive on private lands, while limited populations have been evident in National Parks in the region. Further populations are expected to become evident in the central north region of Victoria in the coming weeks. The attached map shows locust activity reports and observations to 27 October 2010. Limited additional reports of locust activity have been received since that date, with none of these reports extending the primary infestation area beyond that shown on the attached map.

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6. The objective of the commission and state agency control is population management in heavily-infested areas to achieve 60 per cent to 70 per cent reduction in population of the locusts in areas treated by these agencies. Additional landholder control aims to provide specific crop and pasture protection. However, it is inevitable that there will remain significant numbers of untreated locusts which will mature and swarm in early summer. The direction of spread of these locusts will depend upon a number of factors, including prevailing weather conditions at the times when populations in each region mature and become capable of full flight. It is also likely that a proportion of the untreated population will remain in their current locations and will establish a second generation through egg laying. While the spring generation of locusts is unlikely to have major impact on Queensland, regeneration of the resident population and migration of remnant populations from elsewhere could result in a significant population in south-western Queensland in summer.
7. Forecasts with regard to the potential impact of the spring locust plague were provided by ABARE-BRS in the Crop Forecast released in September 2010. A full benefit-cost analysis of the spring locust plague and response has been commissioned by the commission and all affected states, with initial results of this analysis likely to be available in December 2010.