

Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Additional Estimates February 2008

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Question: BA 01

Division/Agency: BA

Topic: Access to Quarantine Facilities

Hansard Page: 5 (18/02/2008)

Senator Heffernan asked:

Senator HEFFERNAN—I know, but we are quite different. Could I raise a couple of matters, Mr Chairman? There is a letter from a very distressed—‘please note that DAFF has never corrected incorrect and misleading statements made by it in the *Australian Veterinary Journal*’ by Dr Robert Steele. Is anyone familiar with Robert Steele? He is making some quite serious allegations against the department.

Dr O’Connell—It relates to veterinary issues?

Senator HEFFERNAN—It does. It relates to the disgrace which is the Eastern Creek Quarantine Station, which I raised in the surrounds of the Olympics. At the time I raised concerns about the sloppy procedures out there, which obviously have cost the horse industry a lot of money. To see people wandering in and out of there at lunchtime, going over the road for a grog and just walking back in when, allegedly, it is the quarantine station, is just a joke. I wonder whether you have responded. If you have not, we might present you with this letter so that you can respond directly to it.

Dr O’Connell—I would need to take that on notice.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Thank you, if you could.

Answer:

The answer to the question is covered further on in proceedings by the following exchange on page 69.

Mr Cahill—There have been substantial replies addressing all of the concerns that have been raised. I think we probably reached a point where we exhausted anything new that we could probably say to each other, and I did write to him along those lines as well. But I am happy to participate in any discussions around that via a private briefing.

Senator HEFFERNAN—What I might do is have a yarn to him and get him to succinctly put down — instead of having heaps of letters — his concerns and then we might have a get-together about it.

Mr Cahill—I am happy to do that.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Right. That is all I have.’

Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

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Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Question: BA 02

Division/Agency: Biosecurity Australia

Topic: Apples from New Zealand

Hansard Page: 63-64 (18/02/2008)

Senator Fielding asked:

Mr Roberts—The risk analysis that you are referring to estimated that up to—not all—four per cent of apples could carry fire blight bacteria if there was no risk management in place. That is in the total absence of any risk management measures. The level goes down very substantially when risk management is applied. It is known in the risk analysis as the unrestricted risk. The approach we take to these risk analyses is that we look at the risk. If there was no risk management in place, we then determine whether it is acceptable or not. If it is unacceptable, then we look at risk management measures to bring it down to an acceptable level. So the four per cent level does not reflect the level we estimate would be carried on apples from New Zealand with risk management in place. It is before risk management is applied. So that is just the first point. With regard to the additional research done in Spain, there was actually some published work available on that research by the same research group that was available to us before we finalised our risk analysis. So if you look into the report itself, you will find that that issue has been discussed and considered in reaching a final conclusion and recommendations on the risk analysis. I am quite happy to provide those specific references to the committee if they wish to see them.

Senator FIELDING—If you could supply those, that would be great. Thank you. Very good.

Answer:

The Spanish research work on the potential for fire blight bacteria to enter a viable but non-culturable state is discussed on pages 57 and 58 of the Final Import Risk Analysis Report for Apples from New Zealand released in November 2006.

The Spanish work has been published in two papers in the *‘Proceedings of the Tenth International Workshop on Fire Blight’* in 2004 and one paper in *‘Applied and Environmental Microbiology’*. Copies of these papers are attached.

[BA 02 attachments A &B]

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

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Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Question: BA 03

Division/Agency: Biosecurity Australia

Topic: Imported Prawns

Hansard Page: 74 (18/02/2008)

Senator Scullion asked:

Senator SCULLION—I understand, Mr Hunter, one of the reasons for that is that it was a very low risk that those particular products would be used as bait, for example, to throw in the sea and that was taken into consideration as the difference. Mr Cahill, perhaps on notice—sorry, Senator Heffernan—you could provide us with some formula about exactly what percentage of the batch is actually tested and what 100 per cent testing actually means. I know nobody tests every prawn—I understand that—but exactly what percentage of the batch is, particularly for those organisations that have failed previously? The normal thing would be for an auditing arrangement or noncompliance to go up—and the reverse would also occur. So if you could provide the committee on notice with those formulas, I would appreciate it.

Mr Cahill—I would be happy to.

Answer:

As the occurrence and prevalence of disease varies for every population of prawns, the sampling and testing regime has been designed to take account of these variations and also to make sure that each population of prawns imported to Australia is sampled and tested. This means that 100% of imported uncooked prawn meat batches (populations) are sampled and tested for the three viruses of concern.

A random sample is taken from every batch. The sampling method is designed to detect the three viruses of concern if present at 5% prevalence with at least 95% confidence. The batches are unpacked and identified, a random sample of 13 boxes/bags are removed from each batch to sample individual prawns. Five prawns are selected from each box/bag. The 13 lots of 5 prawns (65 prawns in total) are sent for testing for each batch.

This sampling method and subsequent testing is used in combination with other quarantine measures (eg veterinary certification from the exporting country, and removal of shell prior to importation) to achieve Australia's appropriate level of sanitary and phytosanitary protection.

Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Additional Estimates February 2008

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Question: BA 04

Division/Agency: Biosecurity Australia

Topic: Apples from New Zealand

Hansard Page: written question

Senator Fielding asked:

During the hearing on February 18, 2007, Biosecurity Australia stated it had considered research which found that fire blight could change its form to be viable but non-culturable when calculating its final risk assessment. The conclusion of this risk assessment was that four per cent of apples imported from New Zealand could carry the fire blight bacteria.

However, Biosecurity Australia's Import Risk Analysis document clearly dismisses, rather than considers, this evidence in its final risk calculation. Page 58 reads: "*... the significance of VBNC (viable but non-culturable) in relation to bacterial survival is not yet clearly established ... Furthermore, the ability of E. amylovora to enter into a VBNC state in or on any apple tissue is yet to be demonstrated.*"

Does this important information indicate an increased risk of fire blight being introduced to Australia from imported New Zealand apples beyond Biosecurity Australia's original estimation of four per cent?

Answer:

No. The potential for fire blight bacteria to enter a viable but non-culturable state was considered by Biosecurity Australia in estimating the risk of fire blight disease being introduced into Australia through importation of New Zealand apples.