



The Hills Greens

*PO Box 445 Glenorie NSW 2157 * Ph 9651 3585 **

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Senate Select Committee of the Free Trade Agreement
Federal Parliament

BIOSECURITY IMPACTS OF FREE TRADE AGREEMENT ON LOCAL AGRICULTURAL PRODUCE

I have been asked to write to you on behalf of a number of concerned local primary producers from the Sydney Basin although the issues I am raising have relevance to all farmers, Australia-wide.

A concern of the farmers is that once Australia opens its doors to imported produce, there is a strong possibility of exotic pests and diseases coming in with that produce. They do not believe that the current inspections and quarantining are stringent enough to keep them out.

At a local level, however, NO inspections are undertaken and virtually no quarantining of produce is enforced. Produce is taken to produce markets and, if unsold, is returned to the originating farm. A pest or disease brought in on one farmer's produce has the potential to wipe out entire farms and livelihoods. There are numerous incidences of such cases.

The farmers have asked that, should the Free Trade Agreement go ahead and Australia becomes the dumping ground for overseas produce, you lobby for a ban on the sale of imported produce at any markets where local produce is sold.

Unlike animal production, there are no safeguards, inspections or quarantining, should infected produce be brought into the markets. Both NSW Agriculture (State) and the Department of Agriculture, Forestries and Fisheries (Federal) have ruled out the possibility of produce being inspected prior to arrival at the markets, stating lack of funding as the primary mitigating factor preventing such inspections.

A commercial flower grower who farms in Kellyville, had his entire farm infected with white rust – transported onto his farm on unsold flowers which had been taken to the markets. A neighbouring seller at the markets had brought infected flowers which were then carried around the markets by buyers inspecting other stalls.

As I write, there is currently a “state of emergency” with regard to Lettuce Aphid establishing

itself in Tasmania and which, should it arrive on the mainland, has the potential to wipe out the entire lettuce industry. Currently, the only effective control regime is by applying chemicals which are not registered for use in NSW, although a TEMPORARY minor use permit has just been approved. There is a temporary ban on the export of lettuce from Tasmania to the mainland. However, it is expected that this will be lifted in the near future. Should any of infected lettuce pass unnoticed through inspection and then be transported to local produce markets, the consequences could be enormous. The NZ lettuce industry was practically wiped out a couple of years ago due to Lettuce Aphid infestation which arrived on the north island via a consignment of lettuces trucked up from one farm on the South Island.

It must be noted that for many pests and diseases, there are no legal methods of chemical control. Introduction of new, unknown pest and disease species has the potential to severely impact on local agriculture. Given that it can take up to 18 months to register chemicals for specific pests or diseases on specific crops, entire livelihoods could be wiped out prior to a control becoming available. Further, the APVMA will not register chemicals on a precautionary basis. The pest or disease has to be found before they will pass registration. This is akin to shutting the door after the horse has bolted.

A further point that must be noted is that the highest number of horticulturists from non-English speaking background farm in the Sydney Basin. As there are no permanent bilingual extension officers employed by NSW Agriculture, this farming sector has NO access to information. This, in effect, means that pest infestations could go unidentified, raising the potential of a mass outbreak of national proportions.

I look forward to your response. I attach a Snapshot of Agriculture in the Sydney Basin.

Yours faithfully

Sheryl Jarecki
Convenor: Hills Greens

SNAPSHOT OF AGRICULTURE IN THE SYDNEY BASIN

- Agriculture is the largest single industry employer in western Sydney.
- Farm gate value of produce originating from this growing area is in excess of \$1 billion dollars (Mason, NSW Agriculture).
- This sum has a multiplier effect of around 4.5 in related economic activity.
- 80% of Sydney's fresh vegetables (14% NSW production) and over 90% of cut flowers sold through the Sydney markets are grown in the Sydney Basin.
- Virtually 100% of Asian vegetables sold at the Sydney markets are grown in the Sydney Basin.
- A large amount of the stone fruit, apples and oranges are also grown within the Sydney Basin.
- The bulk of locally grown produce is sold through Flemington Markets in Sydney.
- The largest number of non-English speaking background (NESB) horticulturists in Australia are based in the Sydney Basin. Parker and Bandera (1995) identified that approximately 90% of Sydney Farmers are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.