

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

Inquiry into revised draft Import Risk Analysis report on importation of fresh bananas from the Philippines

Submission by Dr. Chris Hayward, Consultant on Bacterial Plant Diseases

Preamble

The respondent has in-field experience of Moko bacterial wilt of dessert and cooking bananas in Trinidad, West Indies and in Southern Mindanao, the Philippines. In the West Indies during 1957-58 he worked on Moko bacterial wilt and in 1996, 1998 and 2002 inspected plantations, harvesting, processing and packaging of dessert (Cavendish) bananas in Southern Mindanao. He was invited to write the chapter on "Moko disease" in the *Encyclopaedia of Plant Pathology* John Wiley & Sons, 2001. The respondent is a former President of the Australasian Plant Pathology Society (1992-1993) and in 1997 was elected a Fellow of the American Phytopathological Society. He has more than 40 years experience of working with bacterial plant diseases.

Since April 2001 he has served on the Technical Working group (Pathogens) advising the Import Risk Analysis team appointed by Biosecurity Australia to consider the application by the Philippines to export fresh green bananas to Australia.

Comments on the revised Draft IRA Report "Importation of Fresh Bananas from the Philippines" February 2004

1. Australia is a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and a signatory to *Agreement on Agriculture: The Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures* (the SPS Agreement).
2. Member countries have certain rights and obligations under the SPS Agreement.
3. Under the SPS Agreement zero tolerance is no longer an option, i.e., presence of a pest in a potential exporting country but not in the importing country is not alone sufficient reason to deny importation of a particular commodity.

4. The potential importer must carry out an Import Risk Analysis on all of the pests (insects, fungi, viruses, bacteria etc) likely to be carried on the commodity. For each pest there must be a stepwise, science-based analysis of the likelihood of entry of the pest with the commodity, its establishment and spread. The likelihood of entry, establishment and spread may be above or below the importing countries acceptable level of protection (ALOP). Under the SPS Agreement it is the right of any country to set its own ALOP for any commodity.
5. In considering the application by the Philippines to export fresh green bananas to Australia Biosecurity Australia (BA) was required as a first step to draw up pest lists for the Philippines and for Australia in order to determine which were Quarantine Pests, present in the Philippines but not in Australia.
6. The next step is to gather all of the scientific information available for each quarantine pest
7. Moko bacterial wilt caused by the bacterium *Ralstonia solanacearum* race 2 is one of the quarantine pests present in the Philippines but not present in Australia.
- 8 Moko bacterial wilt is a major disease of dessert (Cavendish) bananas but not one of the most destructive. Control measures are well understood but would be costly to implement under Australian conditions.
9. Moko bacterial wilt is most destructive on cooking bananas (plantains) which are not grown or consumed in Australia. On some cooking bananas the disease often becomes epidemic following transmission by insects but can be controlled by debudding or bagging of the inflorescence. Insect transmission of Moko bacterial wilt is not known to be important on dessert bananas in the Philippines.
10. BA made an exhaustive search for and evaluation of the scientific literature on Moko bacterial wilt. The literature is extensive but when BA came to make a systematic study of the likelihood of entry establishment and spread of the pest the literature was found to be incomplete in certain respects.
11. In circumstances where the scientific information was incomplete it would be expected that a country would be conservative in its estimations of likelihood, in order to best protect the national interest.
12. BA has used the most advanced methodology in carrying out its risk analysis. The likelihood of the entry, establishment and spread of Moko bacterial wilt has been estimated conservatively where the scientific information was judged to be incomplete.
13. In the Draft IRA BA proposes two feasible risk management measures for Moko bacterial wilt: sourcing fruit for export from areas of low pest prevalence (ALPP); and restricting the distribution of Philippine bananas in Australia.
14. In the first measure the ALPP level for Moko would not exceed 0.005 cases (infected mats)

per hectare per week, which is about 1 case per 4 hectares per year - i.e., no more than one in 6,800 infected plants per year. This is a stringent requirement. At this stage it is not known whether the Philippine authorities would be able to meet this standard.

15. If the second risk management measure were adopted, involving restriction of the distribution of Philippine bananas in Australia, it would be a criminal offence to discard Philippine banana waste in any part of the area of exclusion (maximum penalty 10 years imprisonment).

Retaguard

March 24, 2004