

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and conduct of the inquiry

Background

1.1 In May 2005 – during consideration of the 2005-06 Budget Estimates in relation to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) – the committee raised concerns about a reported outbreak of citrus canker in the town of Emerald, Queensland. The outbreak had been confirmed in July 2004.

1.2 During the Estimates inquiry process, the committee asked a number of questions in relation to:

- allegations of plant material being illegally imported into Australia;
- the role played by DAFF in terms of early intervention and the emergency response to the outbreak;
- the details of a 'Deed of Arrangement' entered into by AQIS with Pacific Century Productions Ltd (owners of a property called Evergreen Farms on which citrus canker was first detected);
- the progress being made in eradicating citrus canker; and
- the level of financial assistance being provided to affected producers.¹

Terms of reference

1.3 In order to pursue these issues in more detail, on 27 May 2005, the committee resolved to conduct an inquiry into:

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's administration of the citrus canker invasion with particular reference to:

- (1) AQIS' response to the allegations of illegal importation of plant material;
- (2) The adoption of the quarantine protocols and management of the emergency response;
- (3) Cooperation between the Commonwealth and States, including funding issues;

1 Senate RRAT Committee, *Committee Hansard*, 25 May 2005, pp. 28-49

- (4) The impact of the incursion on the Australian citrus industry;
- (5) Prevention and management of future incursions; and
- (6) Other related matters.²

1.4 The committee adopted the inquiry of its own motion, under Senate Standing Order 25(2)(b), which allows legislation committees to inquire into the performance of the departments allocated to them.

Conduct of the inquiry

1.5 Advertisements calling for submissions to the inquiry were placed in *The Australian* on 8 June, 22 June, 6 July, 20 July and 3 August 2005.

1.6 In addition to advertising in the press, the committee also contacted a number of interested persons and organisations advising them of the inquiry, and inviting submissions.

1.7 The committee received 13 written submissions on the reference. A list of submissions is provided in **Appendix 1**.

1.8 Following referral of the inquiry, the committee held a series hearings in the following locations:

Canberra	15 June 2005
Canberra	22 June 2005
Brisbane	27 July 2005
Emerald	28 July 2005
Canberra	12 August 2005
Canberra	14 September 2005
Canberra	1 March 2006
Canberra	29 March 2006

1.9 The *Hansard* transcript of all public hearings is available on the Hansard website at www.aph.gov.au.

1.10 The committee took evidence from more than 35 witnesses, including representatives of industry organisations, citrus growers, individuals employed in the citrus industry and community representatives. The committee also took evidence

2 Minutes of Private Meeting held on Friday, 27 May 2005, Parliament House, Canberra

from representatives of government bodies – both Commonwealth and state. A list of witnesses is provided in **Appendix 2**.

The Committee's aim

1.11 At each of the public hearings held during the inquiry, the committee's Chair stated that the committee's main aim in this inquiry was to seek the facts, not to apportion blame. The committee is aware that in spite of this, there are high expectations, especially among those affected by the citrus canker outbreak that, in its report, the committee will finally unveil who are the culprits. This is not the focus of this report.

1.12 The committee was able to collect evidence that had not been available previously. The committee is grateful to the witnesses who appeared before it for their willingness to give evidence and it will return to this later in this report.

1.13 The worst of the citrus canker emergency appears to have passed. The committee does not doubt the ability of the officers of the agencies involved in the fight against canker to review their actions and draw lessons for the future. However, the committee hopes that its inquiry will assist that process. The committee is also aware that the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has requested that a review be carried out into the technical aspects of how the outbreak was managed.³

1.14 Having looked at the new evidence that became available through its inquiry and with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear to the committee that mistakes were made by AQIS' compliance unit in the handling of the 2001 investigations and by DAFF and the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries in dealing with the 2004 citrus canker outbreak. By pointing to some of these mistakes, the committee hopes to make a positive contribution to the review process to ensure that, in the event of another plant or animal pest outbreak, those mistakes are not repeated.

1.15 The impact of the citrus canker outbreak was not limited to a few citrus growers in Emerald. The whole community was affected and it also had an impact on the wider region. There are lessons to be learned from this pest outbreak, and not just for the bureaucrats who had to manage the emergency response or for the officers at the coalface. The lessons are for all Australians who travel overseas and who are tempted to bring back illegal plant and animal material.

1.16 A short film of the devastation wreaked upon the Emerald community by the canker outbreak should be made and shown on all incoming flights into this country. It would deter the majority of Australians from breaching quarantine laws. But there are lessons in this sad episode also for growers, farmers and for all farm employees: early detection of pests and the willingness to report them is crucial to avoiding this type of economic and personal disaster.

Structure of the report

1.17 Chapter 1 is an introduction to the committee's inquiry.

1.18 Chapter 2 gives some background information on citrus canker and gives an overview of how the Commonwealth and the states deal with plant protection in the Australian federal system.

1.19 Chapter 3 considers issues to do with DAFF's administration of the citrus canker outbreak, particularly AQIS' response to the allegations of illegal importation of plant material and looks at AQIS' management of the quarantine and emergency responses to the outbreak.

1.20 Chapter 4 looks at the impact that the citrus canker outbreak has had on growers and on the community in Emerald, Queensland.

1.21 Chapter 5 states the committee's conclusions and recommendations.

Acknowledgements

1.22 The committee acknowledges the contribution of all those individuals and organisations who prepared written submissions and those who appeared as witnesses, sometimes at great cost to themselves. Their work has assisted the committee considerably in its inquiry.

1.23 Above all, the committee acknowledges the contribution made to the fight against imported plant pests by the whistleblower, Mr Wayne Gillies. Citrus canker was not detected as a result of his action. It may not have been present at the time, in 2001, but as the subsequent outbreak in Emerald shows, every breach of quarantine has potentially disastrous consequences and it is crucial to alert the authorities early to stop any pest incursion before it gets out of hand.

1.24 Mr Gillies has suffered considerably as a result of his action, including experiencing severe stress and having to leave Emerald to live elsewhere. The committee commends him for taking a stand. The committee strongly believes that more must be done to protect whistleblowers and it urges governments, employers, industry groups and members of the public to see this as a common responsibility.