

SENATE INQUIRY – CITRUS CANKER
RESPONSES TO ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FROM HEARING OF
12 AUGUST 2005

- 1. When did AQIS become first become aware of the rumours of illegal importing of cuttings in the Emerald region?**

AQIS first became aware of the possibility of illegal importation of plant material when Mr Wayne Gillies called the AQIS 'Redline' number on 12 June 2001.

- 2. Were they aware from the public meeting of 22 March 2001 at Gatton? Did they attend the meeting?**

AQIS was not advised of the public meeting of 22 March 2001 and did not attend the meeting at Gatton.

- 3. What happened after the meeting?**

DAFF has no record of the public meeting at Gatton or any related events between 22 March 2001 and the call to the AQIS 'Redline' number on 12 June 2001.

- 4. Why was the initial quarantine period converted to 6 weeks, despite the 18 months needed according to expert witnesses?**

Between 26 July 2001 and 18 September 2001 AQIS issued four Orders under the *Quarantine Act 1908* for varying periods.

On 26 July 2001, AQIS issued an Order under section 55A restricting the movement from the property of any plant material or equipment in contact with plant material for an indefinite period.

On 27 July 2001, AQIS issued a supplementary Order under section 55A to prevent the unauthorised removal of the quarantine signage on the property.

On 1 August 2001, Pacific Century Production (PCP) filed an application in the Federal Court of Australia for review of the original Quarantine Order.

On 7 August 2001, following legal advice AQIS issued a new Order under section 35 for a period of six weeks. AQIS was advised that this was the period of time required to complete initial testing of the plant material taken from the property on 26 July 2001.

On 18 September 2001, AQIS extended the Order under section 48(6) for a period of eight weeks.

On 22 October 2001 AQIS signed a Deed of Arrangement with PCP that provided for monitoring of the Evergreen Farms Property for up to eighteen months from 1 September 2001. Eighteen months is the average period of time legally imported plant material would be held in a Post Entry Plant Quarantine facility for screening for quarantinable pests and diseases.

5. Why did AQIS allow the removal of fruit and enter the deed of agreement?

Following legal advice that AQIS could not maintain a Quarantine Order on the plants on the property without evidence of a quarantinable disease or illegal importation, AQIS entered into a Deed of Arrangement with PCP to enable it to harvest the grape crop while AQIS continued to monitor the property and pursue its investigations.

6. Why did AQIS not follow the experience of other countries in relation to citrus canker and order the removal of all trees?

In August 2001, initial testing of the citrus material taken from the property provided no evidence of citrus canker. Ongoing inspection and testing of samples from the citrus crops on Evergreen Farms, up to the final inspection of the property in December 2002 under the Deed of Arrangement, did not identify citrus canker. Citrus plants grown from the original seized material are still being held at the Eastern Creek Quarantine Station and as at July 2005 continue to show no evidence of citrus canker.

Upon detection of citrus canker on the property in 2004, responsibility for the management of the incursion fell to the Queensland Government, with advice and support from other governments under the existing cost sharing arrangements.

Queensland, with the support of all other state and territory governments and peak citrus industry representatives, implemented an eradication strategy that took into account overseas research and experience and adopted, what was understood at that time to be, the most effective of the strategies employed within commercial orchard regions overseas (i.e. the 'cookie cutter' approach).

At the time of the initial outbreak the 'cookie cutter' approach was considered, by the relevant intergovernmental committees and the Queensland Government, to be technically justifiable, in terms of the available evidence (from overseas and locally). Furthermore, Queensland legislation precluded destruction of trees without an evidence-based rationale.

Local experience with this disease has produced evidence that has led to the review of the original strategy and appropriate modifications have been made to reflect the Australian experience in terms of epidemiological, environmental and orchard management factors as it was collected.

The key factors that culminated in the National Management Group (NMG) making its eventual decision to destroy all remaining high risk hosts within the Plant Quarantine Area (PQA) included direct field evidence of long distance spread and the influence of normal orchard practice on the spread of the disease. These factors led to the conclusion that the whole of the PQA was likely to have been exposed to inoculum and, therefore, citrus canker was highly likely to be within the remaining citrus orchards at sub-clinical levels that would take some considerable time to develop into levels where it would be detectable under the surveillance program.

Greater detail on the history of the eradication strategy will be provided in the Department's submission to the Senate Inquiry.

7. Why not release the details of the confidential agreement so the 2002 survey could go ahead?

The terms of the Deed of Arrangement provided that no party could disclose or permit to be disclosed the terms of the Deed except to the extent required by law or in accordance with arrangements agreed by designated officials in AQIS and PCP.

The survey of citrus in the Emerald district proposed by the Consultative Committee did not proceed because there was no power at that time in the Queensland legislation to enforce it and the voluntary cooperation of all growers in the district was required. The Pressler family refused to agree to a survey of their property unless they were given access to the details of the Deed of Arrangement between AQIS and PCP as well as the results of tests done on all other properties. As they were not able to be given details of the Deed and results of tests are released only to property owners themselves, the Plant Health Committee decided that there was little point in undertaking the survey.

8. Why did AQIS decide to concentrate on containment in 2001 and not a disease study? Does AQIS have any regrets in pursuing this course of action? Could a disease study have changed the outcome?

AQIS undertook extensive testing of plant material taken from Evergreen Farms for variety and disease. Testing of the citrus material in August 2001 indicated the possible presence of *citrus tristeza* virus; subsequent testing, completed in February 2001, identified an atypical strain but there was insufficient evidence to confirm it was exotic to Australia. There was no evidence of citrus canker. Testing of the grape material provided no evidence of exotic diseases.

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9. Why did the decision to implement a national disease study only take place after 2PH was diagnosed in October 2004, six months after the likely incursion took place?

A detailed study of the available evidence on citrus canker, in the form of a draft contingency plan, was undertaken by the Office of the Chief Plant Protection Officer (OCPPO) in 2004 prior to the outbreak of the disease. That document included detailed information on the epidemiology of the disease based on the circumstances of international jurisdictions. Upon confirmation of the disease in July 2004, a detailed process of collecting epidemiological information relevant to the circumstances of the Emerald outbreak commenced. Detailed studies have continued throughout the incursion response. That evidence, as it has been collected and analysed, has shaped the emergency response to the disease.

10. The Queensland Department of Primary Industries say (on page 13) no information was provided to change the risk profile before October 2004. Did any information exist?

The Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry cannot comment on what information was held by the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (QDPI). No new evidence was put before the consultative committee or NMG.

11. Is it possible to bring in cuttings for citrus from China?

Citrus propagating material (including cuttings) may be imported from any country. Citrus cuttings require a minimum of nine months growth in a closed Government Post Entry Plant Quarantine facility, during which time they are subjected to mandatory diagnostic screening and observation for viral diseases and disease symptoms. Only disease free material is released from quarantine.

12. How much were the costs of the discontinued Federal Court action? Did each party bear its own costs?

AQIS incurred \$21,925.08 in costs to defend the discontinued Federal Court proceedings.

Under the terms of the Deed of Arrangement the proceedings were discontinued with each party to meet its own costs.