

Submission from

Peter Abetz B.Agric.Sci.(Hons), B.D.
Member of the Legislative Assembly (Western Australia)

To the

Senate Rural Affairs Committee

Enquiring into the Decision

By

**the Director of Animal and Plant Quarantine
to allow the importation of bananas from the
Philippines.**

Unit 4 , 2 Furley Rd

Southern River WA 6110

Ph 08 9256 4900

Email: peter.abetz@mp.wa.gov.au

Introduction:

I wish to apologise for the lateness of my submission, but I only became aware of the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs Committee's inquiry via the local media in Perth this morning. Hence my submission is of necessity rather brief.

My interest in the issue at hand arises from my professional training as an agricultural scientist, having specialized in plant pathology and horticulture. I have a special interest in sustainable agriculture, and was a founding member of the Tasmanian Organic Gardening and Farming Society in 1972, and worked for a number of years as a farm advisory officer with the Dept of Agriculture in Tasmania. I have lectured widely on the subject of sustainable agriculture.

I have a special interest in minimizing the use of pesticides in agricultural and horticultural production. Given the fact that West Australia's banana crops are produced without the use of any fungicides or insecticides, I am strongly opposed to any measures which might put that disease free status at risk.

As an elected representative of the West Australian people, I believe I have a duty to do my utmost to ensure the environmental integrity of our state, and take whatever steps are needed to minimize any negative environmental impact of our agricultural / horticultural industries. Any measures or policies which increase the likelihood of the introduction of new pests or diseases into our growing areas, must therefore be strongly opposed.

I have had opportunity to study the *Final Import Risk Analysis Report for the Importation of Cavendish Bananas from the Philippines Part A* in detail, but have only skim read Part B & C.

The Scientific Basis for the Risk Analysis and Endemic Corruption.

I appreciate that Australia has a policy of *Appropriate Level of Protection (ALOP)*. Nevertheless I have serious misgivings about the repeated word "estimated" risk in the assessments made for each of the 15 diseases/pests. It indicates that these assessments at best, are educated guesses.

Let us assume that the risk assessments are scientifically accurate. They can only be accurate in a setting where everyone involved in the monitoring and

carrying out of the phytosanitary requirements, is a person of absolute honesty and integrity, and conscientiously carrying out every single aspect of the protocols. In the protocols, I see no allowance made for the endemic corruption in the Philippines (and in so much of Asia).

In Western Australia we are currently facing a very real road safety threat because so many workers who have arrived on 457 visas (long term work permits) are allowed to drive with a valid overseas driver's licence. We have so many documented cases of these workers having an officially issued Philippine driver's licence, who have never ever even driven a car! One worker came with a heavy rigid goods vehicle licence, and admitted to the driving assessor of his new West Australian employer, that he had never even driven a passenger car, let alone a truck! (These situations are also occurring with people from India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.) When asked how they obtained their licences, there is a grin, and the phrase: *under the table* is used.

Given this endemic corruption, for the ALOP to be met, it would be absolutely essential that Australian AQIS officers be stationed in the Philippines, who not only check the paper work and do occasional audits as suggested in part B 20.2.4, but actually monitor ALL the phytosanitary procedures for every consignment. Anything less than this level of supervision would almost guarantee the introduction of Moko and Black Sigatoga, not to mention the various insect pests.

To check documentation provided by Philippine authorities would be a futile and meaningless exercise, and would afford no protection for West Australia's disease free status.

Given the systemic failure of AQIS as demonstrated by the Equine influenza outbreak, and the citrus canker outbreak, banana growers in West Australia and myself, have grave misgivings about entrusting our disease free status to BioSecurity Australia and AQIS.

The problem is that **once we loose our disease free status, we can never regain it.** The consequences will be a massive increase in the use of pesticides. Black Sigatoga will require a weekly spray of fungicide to control. Given the proximity of the Queensland industry to the Great Barrier Reef, there is every likelihood that the Environmental authorities in Queensland would not allow such a spray program, which in effect would cause the demise of the Queensland banana industry.

The Federal Government ought also be aware that in the event of an outbreak of a disease /pest through the importation of bananas from Philippines, could leave the Government open to a class action by banana growers, and communities affected by the demise of the banana industry.

Conclusion

It is my considered opinion that the risk of the phytosanitary protocols being violated through incompetence and corruption in the Philippines, and the improbability of fruit merchants in Australia being able to identify the symptoms of infected fruit, makes the importation of bananas from the Philippines too great a risk. The potential cost to the environment, let alone the economic cost, far outweighs any short term benefits consumers may receive through being able to purchase cheaper bananas.

Respectfully submitted

Peter Abetz B.Agric Sci.(Hons.); B.D.; M.L.A.

Member for Southern River