



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

# Official Committee Hansard

## SENATE

RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT  
LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

**Reference: Import risk analysis for bananas**

WEDNESDAY, 9 FEBRUARY 2005

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE



## **INTERNET**

The Proof and Official Hansard transcripts of Senate committee hearings, some House of Representatives committee hearings and some joint committee hearings are available on the Internet. Some House of Representatives committees and some joint committees make available only Official Hansard transcripts.

The Internet address is: **<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>**

To search the parliamentary database, go to:  
**<http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au>**

**SENATE**

**RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT LEGISLATION COMMITTEE**

**Wednesday, 9 February 2005**

**Members:** Senator Heffernan (*Chair*), Senator Buckland (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Cherry, Ferris, McGauran and Stephens

**Participating members:** Senators Abetz, Allison, Bishop, Boswell, Brown, George Campbell, Carr, Chapman, Coonan, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Greig, Harradine, Hogg, Hutchins, Knowles, Lightfoot, Ludwig, Lundy, Sandy Macdonald, McGauran, Mackay, Mason, McLucas, Nettle, O'Brien, Payne, Robert Ray, Santoro, Tchen, Tierney, Watson and Webber

**Senators in attendance:** Senators Boswell, Cherry, Heffernan, McLucas, O'Brien and Stephens

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

The administration of Biosecurity Australia with particular reference to the revised draft import risk analysis report released in February 2004 relating to bananas from the Philippines, including:

- (a) the processes and research underpinning the analysis;
- (b) the conclusions and recommendations; and
- (c) related matters.

**WITNESSES**

**BANKS, Dr David John Douglas, Principal Scientist, Biosecurity Australia..... 1**  
**CAHILL, Mr John, Interim Chief Executive, Biosecurity Australia..... 1**  
**STYNES, Dr Brian Anthony, General Manager, Plant Biosecurity, Biosecurity Australia ..... 1**  
**WONDER, Mr Bernard Steven, Deputy Secretary, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and  
Forestry ..... 1**



**Committee met at 5.15 p.m.****BANKS, Dr David John Douglas, Principal Scientist, Biosecurity Australia****CAHILL, Mr John, Interim Chief Executive, Biosecurity Australia****STYNES, Dr Brian Anthony, General Manager, Plant Biosecurity, Biosecurity Australia****WONDER, Mr Bernard Steven, Deputy Secretary, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry**

**CHAIR**—I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee. The committee is continuing the inquiry commenced last year on the revised draft import risk analysis for bananas from the Philippines. Once again I welcome everybody here. The committee has authorised the recording, broadcasting and rebroadcasting of these proceedings in accordance with the rules in the order of the Senate of 23 August 1990 concerning the broadcasting of committee proceedings. I place on the record that all committee witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to their submissions and evidence. Any act by any person which may disadvantage a witness on account of their evidence is a breach of privilege. While the committee prefers to hear evidence in public, the committee may agree to take evidence confidentially. However, the committee may still publish or present confidential evidence to the Senate at a later date. The committee would consult the witness concerned before doing this. The Senate can also order publication of confidential evidence.

Today's hearing is public and open to all. A *Hansard* transcript of the proceedings is being made and will be made available by the secretariat or Parliament House Internet home page early next week. If you would like to make an opening statement, we would then like to ask you some questions.

**Mr Cahill**—Thank you, Mr Chairman, for the opportunity to appear before this committee. Much has happened to Biosecurity Australia since the last hearings of this committee on 16 and 30 June 2004. I think it is important that I outline to the committee by way of this opening statement some key developments that have occurred in the intervening period.

On 15 July 2004 the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Hon. Warren Truss, announced:

To remove any perception that trade considerations rather than scientific analysis influence IRA recommendations, Biosecurity Australia (BA) will be established as a separate agency outside the agricultural market access (trade) area of the department.

A Standing group of eminent scientists will be appointed, in addition to the scientific IRA panel, to play a key role in assessing stakeholder comments on draft IRAs.

On 11 August 2004 the minister announced that three eminent Australian scientists had been appointed members of the Eminent Scientists Group: Emeritus Professor Malcolm Nairn AM, Dr Jim Peacock AC and Dr John Radcliffe AM.

As part of announcements during the election period, additional commitments were made to further strengthen quarantine and border protection arrangements, including changes to boost the integrity of the IRA process and the independence of Biosecurity Australia. In particular, commitments were made that: BA would become a prescribed agency; IRAs in progress would be reviewed and reissued; and the IRA framework would be set in regulation.

Biosecurity Australia became a prescribed agency on 1 December 2004. I was appointed interim chief executive from that day, some 10 weeks ago. There has been much to do. As well as a new measure of independence and autonomy, BA also has additional responsibilities and accountabilities as a prescribed agency that did not exist previously. Much of the initial work that needed to be progressed essentially relates to the setting up of BA in its new organisational form. This includes the financial separation of BA from the department, the setting of budgets, opening bank accounts, obtaining new credit cards, sorting out cash and accruals and a wide range of administrative and personnel matters. Importantly, BA is also required as part of the prescribed agency status to have an outcome statement that is distinguishable from that of the department and meets relevant constitutional requirements that provide the basis for financial separation. BA's outcome is:

To provide science based quarantine assessments and policy advice that protects Australia's favourable pest and disease status and enhances Australia's access to international animal and plant related markets.

BA was previously covered by the DAFF outcome of:

More sustainable, competitive and profitable Australian agricultural food, fisheries and forestry industries.

In addition to the very important financial, personnel and administrative matters have I have touched upon, I have also put in place a new senior management structure for BA. I have advertised three senior executive

positions in the *Gazette* and the press as well as two non-SES positions. These vacancies closed last week and I am proceeding urgently with the selection processes. This new structure reflects the need to strengthen capacity in some areas as well as the need to replace some senior staff who are expected to depart from their current positions in BA over the next few months.

In particular, I have created a new branch that will have specific responsibilities for assisting the Chief Executive of BA to improve: BA's quality control, editorial and publishing processes; the way in which we engage and communicate with stakeholders more effectively; the overall systems we use to manage the assessments and policy advice we are responsible for giving to the director of quarantine; the planning, priority setting and review mechanisms we need to have in place to ensure the highest quality and timeliness of outputs; and the coordination of BA's work and the secretariat support provided for the range of tasks, including the record keeping arrangements for risk assessment teams.

As I have said, re-establishing BA in its new form has been a major part of the initial work being undertaken. However, BA has also moved quickly to give effect to the government's commitment that BA would review and reissue the import risk assessments in progress. There are five IRAs affected by this commitment. Those IRAs previously issued as draft documents that will require reissue are the draft assessments of applications to import limes from New Caledonia, table grapes from Chile, citrus from Florida, apples from New Zealand and bananas from the Philippines.

To assist me in the task of ensuring a proper review has been completed and to inform decisions on the most appropriate action required to fulfil the government commitment to reissue these IRAs, I formed a small panel to provide advice to me on these matters. The panel comprises Mr Murray Rogers AM, Chair of the Quarantine and Exports Advisory Council, and Dr David Banks in his capacity as Principal Scientist with Biosecurity Australia. The tasks of the panel have been documented and are provided to this committee.

The panel has worked closely with BA and the IRA teams essentially as a check on the review processes and the way forward on reissuing the IRAs. The panel will report to me in the next day or two, following which I will be in a position to determine the most appropriate process for reissuing the IRAs as draft documents for further comment from stakeholders. I expect the process of reissue to be able to commence shortly and to continue for some months.

Mr Chairman, in addition to the very important tasks I have only touched upon, the substantive business of BA that is reflected in the outcome statement I provided earlier in terms of quarantine assessments and policy advice has of course continued. The work of the apples IRA team has continued so as to address the issues raised in earlier hearings of this committee as well as to address the some 200 submissions received since the comment period on the draft IRA report previously issued closed on 23 June 2004.

In relation to the bananas IRA, the committee will be aware that following earlier hearings of the committee and concerns with the draft report, the comment period was initially extended to 15 September 2004. Advice was issued to stakeholders on 27 August that a further draft IRA report on bananas would need to be issued. A new chair of the banana IRA team also needs to be appointed.

Mr Chairman, that concludes my opening statement. Thank you again for the opportunity to do this. My colleagues and I would be happy to respond to questions.

**Senator McLUCAS**—This may have been covered in your earlier comments, but where are we up to with the banana IRA as separate from the broader changes to BA in its structure?

**Mr Cahill**—The opening statement I made amongst other things emphasised that a lot of the work that had gone on in BA since 1 December, when BA became a prescribed agency, had focused on arrangements for giving effect to the prescription, so organisational, administrative, personnel related issues but recognising that the substantive work of BA also continued. In relation to the particular inquiry into bananas, I defer to Dr Stynes to say something about that.

**Dr Stynes**—The banana risk analysis team has not met since the election. There is to be the appointment of a new chair to the risk analysis team. We have scheduled a meeting for 21 and 22 February—I think it is the Monday and Tuesday of that week. Their immediate priorities will be similar to what is going on with the apple risk analysis team to start in a very structured way to wade through the comments that have been received in response to the release of the revised draft and the release of the addendum. There are 33 submissions that have to be looked at.

The risk analysis team for apples have been developing a structured database to make sure that all comments are captured in some way so that we can ensure that they have all been addressed and that none slip



through the cracks. I would propose that the banana risk analysis team look at that model and that structured approach and adopt that when they deal with the comments before they start to document another revised draft.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Who is on the risk assessment team?

**Dr Stynes**—There are Bob Paton from New South Wales, Rob Allen from Queensland, Bryan Cantrell—another Queensland—Dr Sharan Singh from Biosecurity Australia, Mike Robbins from AQIS, and David Peasley. They are the members.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Why has a chair not been appointed at this point in time?

**Mr Cahill**—I am not sure whether you were here earlier when we had the discussion about the review and reissue commitment that had been made in relation to IRAs in progress. I expect to receive a report in the next couple of days from the panel I formed to assist me in determining the process of review and reissue of the five IRAs that had previously been issued. Bananas, of course, is one of those. The chair of the banana IRA team is a matter that I have under consideration. The IRA handbook requires that there be consultation with stakeholders as part of that process, and I am in consultation with stakeholders about that.

**Senator McLUCAS**—You would expect that you would make a decision about the chair before the 21st and 22nd.

**Mr Cahill**—I will be making a decision about the chair certainly before then, yes.

**Senator McLUCAS**—How do you go about the process of consulting about the chair?

**Mr Cahill**—I engage in discussion with the key stakeholders and take their views. I have spoken to the banana council today, for example, about that matter and will be talking to them again next week.

**Senator McLUCAS**—As a follow-up question to that of Senator Stephens, what do you imagine the time line to be? It sounds to me that bananas are a little behind apples. Is that a reasonable comment to make? It is not value laden, it is just a question.

**Mr Cahill**—It is a concurrent process. As you know, they are different teams. They will continue their work on the same time line. As to when they get to the end of the task that they have I am not too certain at this point. There are, I think, 33 submissions on the last draft of the IRA and a new draft needs to be issued. As to when that will be precisely I need to take some further advice from both the team and from BA. That clearly, at least in one respect, is contingent upon the new chair.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Is it inappropriate to ask how long that might be? I mean that honestly.

**Mr Cahill**—No, it is not inappropriate. I would answer you precisely if I could but I cannot because I do not know. I am keen to make sure that BA completes the IRAs in a timely fashion, but it is important that that is done in a way that ensures that the IRA teams are able to do their work as they think they need to. I am certainly looking at ways in which BA can help in that task with additional resources if they are required. I certainly expect that over the next few weeks I will get to a point where I have a better idea of the time line for this IRA, but I would expect it to be some months before it is able to be reissued.

**Senator STEPHENS**—If I could copy Senator Stephens: this year?

**Mr Cahill**—I would hope so—I would expect so.

**Senator McLUCAS**—‘Back in August last year we said that we would issue a revised draft.’ That was following consultations with stakeholders and others potentially as a result of some information that had come out of this inquiry. Did those consultations and the decision that led to the decisions in August of last year reveal errors in the methodology that was adopted in the previous IRA?

**Dr Stynes**—The sequence was that there were some concerns raised with us by the Australian Banana Growers Council about the modelling—they were taking advice from their consultants. A delegation from BA met with the Queensland university maths team and we were in agreement about most of the elements of concern that they had with the model. At that time obviously there was a need to reissue again. There was a particular element in the model—a constant term in one of the steps in the model. The view was that it should not be there. In a group of statisticians around the table from CSIRO, the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology and from BRS from within our agency there was consensus around the table that that particular step in the model would need to be considered. A constant being positioned there may be needed in some other part of the model but it was certainly inappropriate at that particular step.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Was it a mistake in the methodology that was adopted in the development of the IRA?

**Dr Stynes**—No.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Or was it a calculation error?

**Dr Stynes**—It wasn't either actually. The logic of the model is sound. The mathematical structure of the model is sound. It was an interpretation of the input that was taken by the risk analysis team. You do expect those sorts of things from time to time but no-one realised the implications at the time until someone else with new eyes had a look at it. That was a very valuable time. They are the sorts of comments that we need to get back when looking at a draft. It has an impact on the outcomes and outputs of the model and it also has implications for the risk management measures that have been proposed.

**Senator McLUCAS**—So for a lay person like myself, it was a misunderstanding or a miscalculation of the level of risk that was fed into the model from the beginning that then flowed into a series of 'errors' as a result of that. Is that a good understanding?

**Dr Stynes**—I would not like to use the word 'errors'. It was a judgment of a value that needed to go into that particular step in the model that was put in. The consensus now is that that was not appropriate at that particular step. The implications of it are that because it was in the second importation step any mathematical calculation that you do with the model from that time on has that factor or constant embedded in it, so it will always have a flow-on effect through the model, yes. It was not an error as such, it was just an interpretation.

The model is robust, but the outputs are only as good as the inputs into the model. That is where non-mathematicians can make sound judgments and sound contributions on science to look at the levels at which the different parameters in the model should be set.

**Senator McLUCAS**—How can we feel confident as a committee that that error cannot happen again in whatever IRA is being considered?

**Dr Stynes**—It is not an error.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Sorry, a misinterpretation or whatever.

**Dr Stynes**—Those sorts of things are possible. As many good eyes looking at a report as you can possibly get is very important. We have certainly had a lot of comments on various elements of the model. We have had people go through these models very carefully and BRS looked at the model again recently. It is constantly under scrutiny. Models may change. If new information becomes available then risk profiles can change and they are taken into consideration at any time.

**Mr Cahill**—Perhaps I can add a couple of things to that in terms of broader systems and a structural sense for Biosecurity Australia. I talked earlier about some structural changes to the organisation and in particular about the addition of some important capacity that will address issues of quality control, editorial publishing processes, the way stakeholders are engaged and the way we communicate with them, the overall systems we are using to undertake the assessments, et cetera. If you like, I am making a systemic change to the organisation to help improve our capacity in areas of weakness to strengthen the quality of the output. In terms of the kind of assistance we get to ensure that the model and other elements of the report are as robust as we can make them, we need to make sure that we do not unreasonably limit ourselves in relation to that. If that means that we need to engage further assistance from experts such as QUT, if they have disagreements about aspects of the model that we are using or the interpretations, we need to get that assistance. I think it is in everybody's interests that we get it as right as we can.

**Senator McLUCAS**—I could not agree more.

**Mr Cahill**—If there are experts around who are advising stakeholders that have disagreements with some of those elements I would rather get them in the room and talk to them about that if they do not see a conflict of interest in doing that. It is important that our process continues the transparency of that process, that that continues to be reinforced, and that we make it as robust as we can.

**Senator McLUCAS**—I am aware others want to ask questions but I have a final question. Mr Cahill, have you consulted with stakeholders on their views on how the structural changes you have put in place will militate against misinterpretation in future?

**Mr Cahill**—I have talked to some stakeholders about that, yes.

**Senator McLUCAS**—But not in a formal sense?

**Mr Cahill**—No, but I am certainly interested in their views and they are interested in mine. There is an element of ‘suck it and see’ from their point of view. However, I hope that we can convince them that we are taking good steps.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Because we cannot get to that completely adversarial situation that we had last year where organisations like the Australian Banana Growers Council were spending a lot of money having to engage statisticians, advisers and whoever to convince BA that they were correct. You have now acknowledged that and that is good, and let’s move on. Surely we have to militate against that sort of event reoccurring.

**Mr Cahill**—We will make every effort to ensure that we get to that position.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Thank you.

**Senator BOSWELL**—When are you likely to put the new, revised draft out?

**Mr Cahill**—As I said earlier, I cannot be precise about that. The work that needs to be done will take some months. At the present time we do not have a chair of the IRA team.

**Senator BOSWELL**—You did mention it, but who appoints the chair?

**Mr Cahill**—I do.

**Senator BOSWELL**—Is there any hold-up with appointing a chair? What is the reason for the hold-up?

**Mr Cahill**—I am going through a process of consulting with the stakeholders in accordance with the IRA handbook. I had a conversation with the Banana Growers Council as recently as today about that.

**Senator BOSWELL**—A series of questions was put on notice at our last meeting. When are those questions going to be answered?

**Mr Cahill**—We have sent answers to those questions to the committee.

**Senator BOSWELL**—When did we receive those?

**Mr Cahill**—They were sent last week. They were sent in two phases. A large number of answers were, I think, provided last November—

**Senator BOSWELL**—Do you have those—

**CHAIR**—Perhaps you should dig deeper into your in-tray, Senator.

**Senator BOSWELL**—Do you have them, Chair?

**CHAIR**—Yes.

**Senator BOSWELL**—There is a certain amount of frustration in the industry up there. You are connecting with the top end of the industry but the people at the bottom end, the ordinary farmers, are getting very frustrated. They are not sure what their future is. I know you are doing all you can to solve this but, by gee, it has been going on like *Blue Hills*, this IRA. Whether it is a mistake, a miscalculation—whatever you call it—a stuff-up, it is not getting through. All they see out in those farming areas is that there is a big axe hanging over them and they do not know whether imported bananas are coming in. It is having an effect on the valuations of properties. You try to explain it to them, but it is very difficult and they cannot understand why it has taken so long. We have the answer to the questions. Are we going to have to wait for the revised draft before the issues we raised last year are answered?

**Mr Cahill**—That is correct, Senator.

**Senator BOSWELL**—Why don’t we go back and start from scratch? Why don’t we go right back and start again and try to improve on the IRA process that has been tried twice and discredited? Why do we have to put in a new draft IRA when we could just have started again?

**Mr Cahill**—My view on that is that we are committed to issuing a new draft of the IRA. There has been a huge amount of investment on all sides, including on the part of industry, in the work that has been done to date. The indications I am getting are that people want to make sure that we get on with it and bring it to a close one way or another. We need to make sure that we proceed in a way that does not unreasonably constrain the opportunity for comment on drafts.

**Senator BOSWELL**—So you bring down a draft and there is another comment on the draft and then we proceed to the last IRA. Is that correct?

**Mr Cahill**—That is correct.

**Senator BOSWELL**—And you are saying that that process will take months?

**Mr Cahill**—Yes. There are 33 submissions from stakeholders that need to be taken into account on the draft that was last issued. In addition, comments have clearly come out before this committee which need to be considered by the IRA team.

**Senator BOSWELL**—When will you have the draft done—in two months? When is the process likely to be finished? Let us say we have to put the draft down; how long will that take?

**Mr Cahill**—At this point in time, I cannot predict how long it will take to complete the work that needs to be undertaken on the new draft.

**Senator BOSWELL**—Will it be two months, three months?

**Mr Cahill**—I suspect it will be some months before the next draft can be issued.

**Senator BOSWELL**—How long will we then have to wait before we get into the—

**Mr Cahill**—I suspect it would go out again for a further comment period of 60 days, which is the normal comment period.

**Senator BOSWELL**—So this will not be resolved this year? Say it takes you four months and then another three months; that makes seven months. We are into the second month.

**Mr Wonder**—I am sure you are aware of this, Senator, but part of the backdrop to this is that in respect of the IRAs that were current towards the end of 2004—and there were five of them—the government made a commitment to review and reissue those IRAs. Bananas is one of those five IRAs. Mr Cahill is indicating—and this came up in his response to the questions from Senator McLucas—that BA will be very keen to reissue that IRA having taken into account the comments that have been provided. I am sure that the banana industry would want to see the reissuing of a report that takes account of and does not ignore what they have said.

**Senator BOSWELL**—I am not suggesting that. I am just trying to see where the end of the process goes.

**Mr Wonder**—I think Mr Cahill has answered that. He said he believes it will take some months but he is unable to put—

**CHAIR**—In your absence I also asked about the Lachlan River and I think the answer is the same. It will be a full Clydesdale draft and not a half draft and, ‘We don’t know the bloody answer’ is the answer.

**Senator BOSWELL**—I am trying to get some information on when I can inform—

**CHAIR**—Senator Boswell, we have to knock off at 6 p.m. Senator Cherry has some questions, Senator McLucas has one more and I have one.

**Senator BOSWELL**—Well, come back to me if there is any time left.

**Senator CHERRY**—Dr Stynes, returning to the issue I raised earlier about the methodology and the risk analysis model, you mentioned in an answer to Senator McLucas that BRS had had a look at the model. Was that a look at the mathematical risk analysis model?

**Dr Stynes**—Yes, looking at the structure of the model, building it and looking at how we dealt with data we put into it and how the risk analysis team has handled data.

**Senator CHERRY**—Did that deal with the issues that have been raised in submissions about the probability distributions and the 95 per cent confidence?

**Dr Stynes**—Yes. There are numerous submissions that touch on a lot of the details in the modelling. One of the primary tasks of both apples and bananas will be to look very carefully at the consistency through the modelling process. As has been said, that will be done in consultation with the best mathematical brains that we can bring to the task.

**Senator CHERRY**—Is there anything interesting or any insights from BRS that you can share with the committee—we have heard so much evidence on these issues to date—or is it preliminary at this stage?

**Dr Stynes**—It is preliminary but separately they have been going through the comments as well. They are filtering out the comments that are relevant to the modelling areas. They have been looking at the distributions of the various inputs and how the risk analysis teams viewed those distributions and the clustering of data. It is at a preliminary stage but it is being very thorough.

**Senator CHERRY**—I flag my interest in that so if anything develops in that area which you think the committee should know about, perhaps you could take that generally on notice. That is an issue we will have to report on because it has been an issue key to all three inquiries.

**Dr Stynes**—That is right. Pigs, bananas and apples are essentially using the same model, so ensuring we have consistency and best practice in the way our risk analysis teams handle data, likelihoods and inputs into the model is very important.

**Senator CHERRY**—My last question before I hand over to other senators relates to relations with the states. I suppose this question would be better directed to Mr Cahill or Mr Wonder. In both apples and bananas there were some very critical submissions from the various state governments. In terms of rebuilding confidence in the risk analysis process, are you looking at a different consultative arrangement with the states to try to develop a bit of official agreement on these sorts of issues? How is that going to play out in apples and bananas?

**Mr Cahill**—In a general way I am looking at ways we can improve engagement with stakeholders, and the states are clearly an important part of that. Again, I have not thought through the details of that yet. I am trying to get some extra capacity in the organisation to provide us with the ability to rebuild some of those things.

**CHAIR**—Do you know Mr Clarito Barron?

**Mr Cahill**—I don't, no.

**CHAIR**—He is the BPI acting executive director in the Philippines. He put out a press release in which he says—and I do not know whether this is right; you might be able to tell me—that one of the requirements on the importation of bananas is that they must come from a disease free area in the Philippines. That would be a reasonable statement, wouldn't it?

**Dr Stynes**—The measures in the existing draft are about sourcing bananas for import from areas of low pest prevalence for particular pests. There is no area free—

**CHAIR**—And the particular pests he names are moko, sigatoka and mealy bugs. Are they some of the pests we require—

**Dr Stynes**—It has been our experience that there is a fair bit of licence in the Philippines press that does not always equate to what people have been talking about. I am pretty sure Clarito Barron is my equivalent in the Bureau of Plant Industry in the Philippines.

**CHAIR**—Yes. He says in his press release, and he is a quarantine expert, that Australia's requirement to seek a 100 per cent pest free area for all six identified banana diseases is simply impossible.

**Dr Stynes**—It is not a requirement of Australia.

**CHAIR**—So that is him using a bit of licence.

**Dr Stynes**—I would suspect that that could be a misquote as well. He would be aware of the conditions. As I said, I am not sure whether that is a press release or whether it is a press article.

**CHAIR**—It might be from an article. We might check to see whether this is accurate because, if it is, I do not like his career prospects.

**Senator McLUCAS**—I understand that officers of BA visited the Philippines late last year. Is that correct?

**Dr Stynes**—That is correct.

**Senator McLUCAS**—What was the purpose of that visit?

**Dr Stynes**—David Banks and I both went to the Philippines. The purpose was to respond to an invitation from the Philippines to allay their concerns and give them some comfort as to where we were going with the banana risk assessment, amongst other things. During the visit, we covered a whole range of quarantine issues apart from bananas.

**Senator McLUCAS**—So it was to allay concerns and provide comfort to BPI personnel?

**Dr Stynes**—It went beyond BPI. The representations from the Philippines were from industry groups and BPI.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Can you tell us who you met?

**Dr Stynes**—I could not give you an accurate list now. We can certainly take that on notice and get back to you. It included people from commercial banana growers or marketers and producers, pineapple and mango producers, and representatives from BPI and from other areas of government.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Did you meet politicians?

**Dr Stynes**—I do not think we met any politicians, no.

**Senator McLUCAS**—I understand that when a delegation of that level travels overseas, records of conversations are usually made as a matter of course. Did that occur on this trip?

**Dr Stynes**—We have a record of that visit, yes.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Is it possible for the committee to be provided with the record of conversations? Could you take that on notice?

**Dr Stynes**—Certainly.

**Mr Cahill**—It is not a record of conversations per se; it is a record of the visit—who they met and what the outcomes and so on of the visit were.

**Senator McLUCAS**—So it is not called a record of conversations?

**Mr Cahill**—No, it is a record of the visit.

**Senator McLUCAS**—It is a record of visit. It is like a report.

**Mr Cahill**—Yes.

**Senator McLUCAS**—That would give me an understanding of who you met and what you agreed at each of those meetings?

**Mr Cahill**—Yes. We are happy to provide that.

**Senator McLUCAS**—That would be great.

**Dr Stynes**—We had one major meeting at Davao. It was a very brief visit, and it does give details of the conversation that took place.

**Senator McLUCAS**—It would be great if we could get that on notice.

**CHAIR**—Did you meet any growers?

**Dr Stynes**—Yes. We visited a banana plantation.

**CHAIR**—Did the biggest banana grower in the Philippines meet you?

**Dr Stynes**—I am not sure who the biggest banana grower in the Philippines is.

**CHAIR**—It is the minister for agriculture, I think you will find.

**Dr Stynes**—No, we did not. Are we talking about his physical size or whether he grows the most bananas?

**CHAIR**—I understand that he is a substantial banana grower. You could come in as a producer or a person who had a political and a commercial interest.

**Dr Stynes**—I think the level we were at was perhaps deputy secretary level. I am not sure whether they are politically appointed or not.

**Senator CHERRY**—You said you discussed pineapples as well. Are the Philippines trying to reopen that protocol as well?

**Dr Stynes**—They discussed the protocol which they believe is too severe to export to Australia. We clarified some areas of that protocol that gave them a bit more comfort.

**Senator BOSWELL**—What were they complaining about?

**Dr Stynes**—They were complaining primarily about having to top pineapples and having to fumigate them. In a sense, the meeting was very important and critical.

**Senator BOSWELL**—That frightens me. What comfort did you give them?

**Senator McLUCAS**—It frightens me as well.

**Dr Stynes**—They still had to top and fumigate pineapples, but their concern about topping was that if topped pineapples were put on the market here, they would not sell. In the Philippines the top of the pineapple

is used in decorations when they serve these things. They take a bit of offence at topping pineapples. There is also a quality issue with fumigation in terms of shelf life.

**Senator BOSWELL**—I know what it does, but I am more interested in the comfort situation.

**Dr Stynes**—The comfort was that we do not in Australia use the tops of pineapples in a decorative way.

**CHAIR**—So we would not miss them.

**Dr Stynes**—On fumigation, we have done some experimental work which shows that the effect on shelf life is marginal, but more recently Malaysia has done some more extensive research on fumigation which shows that if pineapples are fumigated at a particular physiological growth stage, there is no effect on shelf life. That was new information for the Philippines.

**CHAIR**—You realise that was all from a slip of the tongue.

**Senator McLUCAS**—I thank officers from BA for the answers that they have provided to the questions. To be frank, they took a little longer than I thought they would take. Did they have to go through the minister before they came to the committee?

**Mr Cahill**—No, Senator.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Is there a reason for the delay?

**Mr Cahill**—As soon as I became aware that the questions were outstanding I moved quickly to provide them to the committee.

**Senator McLUCAS**—So when did you become aware?

**Mr Cahill**—I became aware of that, I think, on 18 January, when the secretary of the committee wrote to me and reminded me that they were outstanding.

**Senator McLUCAS**—I thought that they were outstanding before then.

**Mr Cahill**—They were outstanding—

**CHAIR**—But he might not have been aware of it. That is the beauty of there being a new man; he can get away with that!

**Senator McLUCAS**—So BA might have been aware but Mr Cahill was not aware. Anyway, that is by the bye. Thank you for the answers to the questions. The next question that I am interested in goes to an issue that has been raised with this committee on a number of occasions: the veracity of the information that we have from the Philippines and whether or not we have rigorously and appropriately assessed that information. You answer it in question 14 but I am not confident, to be frank. You are saying that they are published and they are peer reviewed, and that is all well and good, but what is BA going to do to ensure that the advices that have been provided by the Philippines government in answer to questions asked appropriately by BA are tested? How is that going to be different? I could not see evidence of that with the last draft IRA. This answer does not make me feel a lot more comfortable, to be frank.

**Dr Stynes**—It relates to a whole lot of information exchanged between us and the Philippines. There were four particular pieces of research that we asked the Filipinos to do, and two of those pieces of research have been completed in a satisfactory way. One was the effect of alum on bacteria on the surface of bananas. They have confirmed for us that that is effective. The other piece of research related to the symptomless expression of disease or the time period until symptoms do express. Again, that work did confirm what we had interpreted from the existing literature. So it was confirmatory work in a sense. There were two pieces of work that they have not done. We can only request them to do it. If they choose not to do it then we will use our best judgment to interpret the existing science in the absence of any more precise information. Our position in those circumstances would be to take a conservative view.

Other information that has been exchanged and sought has been survey data. There was certainly some mention that I am aware of in a lot of the submissions about the unreliability of that data. In a sense that is not important. If we have a measure in place that requires the threshold level of symptoms to be in a plantation then that is the critical issue. How they get there is their business. If they have underestimated the incidence of disease then there will be fewer plantations that would be eligible to send bananas to Australia. So that would clearly be a disadvantage to them. So the model is not reliant on that data being perfectly accurate. Of course we would like that data, and we have repeatedly asked for it. That is not to say that they have not given us data; they have given us good records of lots of things. It might sound worse than it is. It has not materially influenced the modelling work.

There is another piece of work that I am aware of that they could not do. It was looking at insect transferral of the bacterium, which impinges on race differences in the bacterial strain as well. We suspected that this particular bacterium could be insect transmitted. We wanted to know that—we wanted confirmation of that. They have not been able to confirm that. So we have assumed that it is insect transmitted—that it can be insect transmitted—which again places a more conservative position on some of those steps in the model.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Just going back to the survey data that you talked about, Dr Stynes, you said that it is underestimated in the responses from the Philippines. That is not in their interests. What if it is overestimated? I am trying to work out how you test the information that is provided.

**Dr Stynes**—You do not use that as an input to determine a level that we will accept. If they have overestimated then there is every likelihood that more of their production will be eligible for export to Australia, because the disease incidence will be lower than we have been led to believe.

**Senator McLUCAS**—I see a contradiction where you say ‘it is not important to have’ and then you can tell me that larger numbers of plantations may be more eligible to export. There is an inherent contradiction in what you are saying.

**Dr Stynes**—That is right. I need to make it clearer.

**Senator McLUCAS**—Please.

**Dr Stynes**—The model—the work itself—looks at a particular measure. The degree of infection that is actually in reality is not an input into the model per se. So we establish a threshold as a determination of what the level of risk is and then we say, ‘That is the level that we will accept to be eligible as a registered area of low pest prevalence.’ That comes out of the model. If the Philippines have wide areas—lots of plantations—that are eligible on that basis then so be it. If they have underestimated then there will be a different picture.

**CHAIR**—Who makes this prevalence inspection? Who ticks it off?

**Dr Stynes**—It is not as though they have not sent us any data. The Philippines have sent us quite a lot of data.

**CHAIR**—Yes, but say, as we do, they say, ‘This area here has no fruit fly.’

**Dr Stynes**—It would be very similar. The big operators in the Philippines do weekly surveys, and that would be a requirement, obviously. That would be an inspection that they would do and it would be an inspection that would be auditable. There would be a process there and it would also involve Australian auditing. I would believe that we would have Australians involved in inspections to check that methodology.

**CHAIR**—What are the Japanese requirements? They have their own people in the field, don’t they?

**Mr Wonder**—To come back to your earlier point—Dr Banks might help, because it relates to what Senator McLucas was asking about—I hear the officers saying that, yes, the information is obtained from the Philippines, but Biosecurity Australia has to satisfy itself on the veracity of that information. I hear Dr Stynes saying that if BA are not satisfied then they revert to the conservative assumption that rejects the evidence they have in front of them for a more conservative position. They do not accept the evidence that has been put in front of them from the Philippines, or indeed from anyone else, unless they can satisfy themselves on the veracity of that information.

**CHAIR**—We have a few other questions to which we would like written answers. We are no longer protected by privilege, so we had better shut up! Thank you very much for your attendance. We will give you some questions that are pertinent to our issues. We hope that we can get prompt replies so that we can report on time.

**Committee adjourned at 6.05 p.m.**