



SUMMARY REPORT

Biosecurity and market access: An assessment of the capacity of the Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia to address plant industry market access issues during a biosecurity response

June 2017

Executive summary

In late April 2017, the Minister for Agriculture and Food (the Minister) requested advice from the Biosecurity Council of Western Australia (the Council) on the capability and capacity of the Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia (DAFWA) for securing market access in a horticultural biosecurity incident. DAFWA's response to the recent tomato-potato psyllid (TPP) incursion was to be the starting point for advising how agency capability can be improved for future biosecurity incidents.

An 'Issues Statement' was developed to provide a summary of the potential underpinning factors that may have contributed to the major loss of market access and inability to recover access in a timely way, during the TPP incident. This was used to inform in-depth interviews with industry and government stakeholders. The information gathered provided a strong foundation for the Council's advice to government.

The TPP/*Candidatus Liberibacter solanacearum* (CLso) complex and the wide range of host plants implicated made this one of the most challenging incursions for DAFWA in recent years. DAFWA took immediate and decisive action on managing the incident, and closely engaged industry through its key representatives. It was also successful in implementing a cost-sharing agreement with the other states in an unprecedented short time.

There were, however, weaknesses. These were systemic and, in part, attributable to inexperience, loss of key skills and a reduction in key functional areas (such as surveillance). From the interviews, four key issue areas were identified — strategy and structure; DAFWA staffing; industry collaboration; and complexity at the national level.

The strategy adopted by DAFWA to deal with this national exotic plant pest incursion was, at times, haphazard. For example, in the early stages of the incident response, the priority given to market access was questionable; and there was a reluctance to make use of interstate expertise.

Interstate market access became a concern when DAFWA did not take leadership, made an inconsistent effort and had an inadequate understanding of the roles and responsibilities in coordinating the documentation and supporting information needed for market access outcomes through the national Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed (EPPRD). Additionally, there was a fundamental weakness in the Chief Plant Biosecurity Officer (CPBO) role, with the conventional responsibilities of the CPBO in an emergency plant pest incursion being shared among the CPBO and other staff. This contributed to a loss of trust and confidence in WA by the other jurisdictions.

Past DAFWA strategy also impacted on market access activities. The limited pre-emptive planning undertaken by DAFWA, limited understanding of the affected horticultural industries, limited availability of surveillance data (and no appropriate database to store this data) and reduced scientific/research capability — all of which affected the ability of DAFWA in its market access negotiations — may be a consequence of past staff reductions meaning less resources for these critical anticipatory activities to be undertaken.

There was a structural constraint to including market access staff within the TPP incident response structure, with the pressured environment making it difficult for staff to undertake critical activities.

The appropriateness of the staffing appointments was queried. Specifically, staff without market access experience were participating in (or inserting themselves into) market access activities; animal-related principles being applied to the response was a point of tension for Plant Biosecurity staff; several rotations of staff/leadership resulted in poor coordination/direction; and too few staff had previous experience of a major plant pest incursion response.

The capability and capacity of DAFWA was the core issue underpinning many of the weaknesses. In particular, knowledge and skills in market access activities; scientific and research capabilities; understanding of and relationships with industry; compliance and enforcement skills; surveillance capability; and incident response capacity require attention.

There is opportunity for industry knowledge and skills to be better harnessed by DAFWA. Industry's practical knowledge is vital in the formulation of market access protocols and agreements. Furthermore, there are situations where industry personnel are best placed to undertake specific activities during a biosecurity incident response. This must be recognised, and the trust built, so that this resource can be called upon.

Complexities at the national level compounded the issues faced by DAFWA in its negotiations on market access. Industry and some DAFWA staff were frustrated at the lack of timely decisions being made under the current EPPRD national committee structure. Furthermore, DAFWA faced hardened attitudes from other states. Western Australia has a reputation with the other states at being overly vigilant in closing its border; and the length of time it takes for Western Australia to complete interstate

market access requests is well-known. The onus is on Western Australia to try to rectify this situation.

The TPP incident response has highlighted systemic weaknesses in DAFWA's capacity to address plant industry market access issues during a biosecurity response.

Questions of strategy and structure, DAFWA staffing, industry collaboration and complexities at the national level all contributed to the early failure in securing market access for affected horticultural products. Although DAFWA recognised, and in some cases addressed, many of the short-falls during the response, much can be improved.

With the formal incident response now closed, there is opportunity to put in place structures and processes to address staff capacity and capability issues and support the preparedness of DAFWA for market access negotiations in any future plant biosecurity incursion. To this end, the Council have made the following eleven recommendations:

- 1. DAFWA creates an Office of the Chief Plant Biosecurity Officer.** The Office should be staffed by the CPBO, a Deputy Chief Plant Biosecurity Officer (DCPBO) and an Industry Liaison/Surveillance Data Officer. During a biosecurity incident response, there is an expectation that the Office will draw on additional expertise, whether from within the agency or external expertise, in order for it to fully undertake its functions. Creation of the Office will contribute to building a more positive reputation with the other states and the plant industries. The DCPBO must be cognisant of the activities of the CPBO, and be recognised by the equivalent positions in other jurisdictions. This will enable the rotation of the CPBO role during a biosecurity incident response without the loss of corporate knowledge or reputation by external stakeholders. The Office must operate in close partnership with the Director of Plant Biosecurity and its technical expertise.
- 2. DAFWA implements a process to build industry networks and attain an increased knowledge of market access/opportunities for WA's plant industries.** The process will require close linkage with the plant biosecurity personnel identified in Recommendation 7 to ensure that networks are maintained and can be actively engaged during a biosecurity incident response.
- 3. DAFWA implements a state-wide active surveillance program for plant industries.** The program should be developed in consultation with plant industries, and be focussed on detecting new threats early (to maximise opportunities to eradicate) and building a robust dataset to support market access statements of pest status, as expected under the Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity (IGAB) arrangements.
- 4. DAFWA implements an appropriate database** that can be a repository for data from both routine surveillance conducted for determining pest status, outside of biosecurity incident responses, and the extensive data collected during an incident response. The database must be able to be interrogated to allow effective and timely reporting of pest status to trading states.

5. **WA recommends that, under the IGAB, an update and publishing of plant pest diagnostic reference laboratories is completed with some urgency.** Coupled with this recommendation is the need to update/review existing national diagnostic protocols.
6. **An independent assessment of the plant biosecurity capability required by DAFWA to undertake its market access responsibilities is completed.** The assessment needs to consider the plant biosecurity capability required for day-to-day operations as well as for effectively responding to incursions. The capability (skillset) must include scientific research and technical skills, surveillance and diagnostics, risk assessment and policy to contribute to meeting market access responsibilities. The assessment should be mindful of the commitments required from WA under the IGAB and the EPPRD. Furthermore:
 - A succession plan for plant biosecurity capability must be included in determining the required skillset.
 - The budget to implement the required plant biosecurity capability should be identified as part of the capability assessment.
7. **DAFWA implements a process to build the capacity of key plant biosecurity skills in the state.** The process to build capacity should be focussed around building a resilient workforce that can adapt to the unpredictability of plant pest incursions. The key plant biosecurity skills cover the following expertise in plant pathology and entomology:
 - Science/research expertise in epidemiology/ecology that builds preparedness and can respond immediately to detections of emergency plant pests
 - Science/research expertise in eradication and control that builds preparedness and can respond immediately to detections of emergency plant pests
 - Expertise in surveillance and diagnostics that enables effective demonstration of pest status within the state
 - Risk assessment processes.
8. **Where appropriate, industry is directly involved with DAFWA in formulating protocols and agreements to enable the movement of produce to the other states.** In addition, industry needs to be directly involved in identifying any chemical (or other control measures) to be incorporated in interstate/intrastate protocols to permit produce movement. The Industry Liaison/Surveillance Data Officer identified in Recommendation 1 should be responsible for planning and overseeing this involvement. DAFWA should second relevant industry expertise, where it will provide benefit, during an incident response.

9. WA amends existing regulations to enable Commonwealth-accredited 'authorised officers', employed by industry, to be state-recognised. This will enable these industry-personnel to be used during a biosecurity incident response — for example, to speed up inspectorial work. DAFWA would be required to train appropriate staff to undertake auditing of the accredited officer program.

10. WA recommends a review of the EPPRD response arrangements to improve decision-making processes. The review is to build on the lessons learned from the TPP incursion that resulted in the circular delegation of decision-making between committees and sub-committees. Specific areas for review include:

- The potential to remove unnecessary complexity from decision-making — to empower members of the Consultative Committee on Emergency Plant Pests to apply judgment, manage risk and be accountable for their decisions
- The application of critical evidence-based decision-making principles to the plant response framework, along with stronger governance and independent oversight
- The proliferation of sub-committees and processes with no apparent defined accountabilities.
- The need for greater harmonisation on information-sharing regarding emergency plant pests.

11. DAFWA commits to resolving pending market access requests/protocols. A concerted effort by DAFWA to complete its work on market access requests relating to commodities seeking access to WA will be an important step toward more effective relations with other jurisdictions.