

Australian biosecurity

Paul Zalai, Director and Co-Founder, Freight & Trade Alliance (FTA) was recently asked to contribute to the “*In My View*” column of the Australian Farm Institute’s quarterly *Insights* newsletter. The column looked at 3 questions on Australian Biosecurity. Paul was joined in the article by Melinee Leather, a beef producer from Queensland, whose other roles include chair of the Farming Systems Committee for National Farmers’ Federation, board director of the Australian Beef Sustainability Steering Group and the Environment Committee for Cattle Council Australia.

“ *While we have witnessed improvements, it is clear that ongoing reform is required in policy, improved systems, transparency in performance, automation and increased departmental human resource allocation* ”

Melinee received an Australian Biosecurity Award in 2019 in recognition for her significant contribution to maintaining Australia’s biosecurity integrity.

What do you see as the largest current threat to Australia’s biosecurity?

ML: I see the largest current threat to Australia’s biosecurity as entry of an unwanted disease. With increased movements of people, animals and parcels around the world the threat of unwanted diseases entering Australia is extremely high. A widespread outbreak of a disease such as African Swine Fever or Foot and Mouth disease would cost the economy billions of dollars and put at risk our ability to trade. Given that 70% of Australia’s total agricultural production is exported this leaves Australia very vulnerable. Even though Australia has some geographical advantage to other countries due to its isolation, the threat of disease entering at our borders is extremely high. Good border control and surveillance is vital in keeping diseases out of the country.

PZ: Threats of biosecurity incursions grow as the volume of freight, passenger, mail and e-commerce volumes continue to rapidly increase. In terms of the international trade sector, our focus revolves around the ongoing collaboration with the Department of Agriculture to safeguard against the introduction of the Brown marmorated stink bug (BMSB).

BMSB is an exotic pest that can infest and damage over 300 host plants, particularly temperate vegetables, fruits and nuts, and important agricultural crops such as apples, grapes, cotton, citrus, corn, soybeans and tomatoes. It has been spreading around the globe from its native north-east Asia, to North America and more recently through Europe.

The former Inspector-General of Biosecurity (IGB) released an independent review in May 2019 noting the efforts of the department to keep BMSB out in 2018–19 stretched Australia’s border biosecurity system close to breaking point and had severe impacts on sections of the shipping and importing industries. She noted that delays and extra costs in cargo



ship unloading and cargo release from biosecurity control were significant but unavoidable due to the need to deal with large numbers of arriving BMSB.

Are Australia's current biosecurity policies robust enough to deal with these threats as well as emerging and future threats?

ML: While Australia's biosecurity policies are quite robust and emergency action plans are thorough the ability to fund the execution of policy is inadequate. It will be vital to secure long-term funding arrangements that can ensure ongoing research and development, border protection, on farm protection and broader community protection is leading the world in biosecurity. Collaboration amongst industry, government, researchers and community must continue to ensure emerging and future threats are well resourced and dealt with using strong policy frameworks. There is no such thing as zero risk when it comes to biosecurity so we must continue to be vigilant with surveillance and response systems. We must strive for a high level of scientific expertise and innovation to ensure that novel and more efficient solutions to new biosecurity threats can be rapidly developed and applied as needed. Environmental biosecurity threats are an area that is often overlooked. Incursions of exotic organisms harmful to Australia's environment and biodiversity are a regular occurrence but don't always get the community and industry attention they deserve.

PZ: The department and industry have responded positively to both the IGB BMSB review and emerging risk and risk assessments carried out by Plant Program, by introducing many new measures in the 2019 – 20 season (high risk goods / origin consignments shipped between 1 September 2019 and 30 April 2020 inclusive) reducing adverse impacts on the movement of international trade.

While we have witnessed improvements, it is clear that ongoing reform is required in policy, improved systems, transparency in performance, automation and increased departmental human resource allocation.

This will clearly come at a cost and will not doubt be borne by the import sector as the "risk creators".

Representing major importers, customs brokers and freight forwarders, FTA / APSA look forward to engaging with the department to deliver a funding model that features:

“ *In terms of the international trade sector, our focus revolves around the ongoing collaboration with the Department of Agriculture to safeguard against the introduction of the Brown marmorated stink bug (BMSB)* ”

- transparency of fund allocation ensuring frontline departmental resources are boosted to best deal with biosecurity threats and to deliver services to industry at agreed levels; and
- mechanisms to pay to the government at a net rate (avoiding the scenario of having charges administered on third parties which results in cascading charges being added down the supply chain inflating costs ultimately paid by importers).

Do you believe the broader industry and community are aware of the significance of biosecurity in protecting Australia's food security and the importance of their role in preventing incursions?

ML: Awareness around biosecurity can always be improved on. In recent years the level of awareness has increased partly due to the biosecurity incursions we have experienced in Australia and those that we have witnessed abroad. The broader community requires continued education not only about biosecurity threats but the actions they must be diligent with for prevention. Human health, public comfort and the importance of protecting food systems in order to feed a growing global population should be good drivers for greater community awareness. For industry to realise the importance of their role across the national biosecurity system they must take ownership of issues and work in a coordinated fashion for the national interest. Industry needs to lead in biosecurity practices which can be driven on farm.

PZ: The broader community are aware of biosecurity matters that 'hit the headlines' such as the highly contagious white spot

in prawn detections and the measures taken to safeguard Australia from the potentially devastating effects of African swine fever.

More could be done to build awareness and highlight other biosecurity risks.

Again, BMSB is a good example.

Public campaigns would be beneficial to demonstrate the initiatives being taken by government and industry. This would give a broader range of stakeholders an appreciation of the extraordinary biosecurity risk posed by this pest and importantly, the work (and associated costs) being committed by the department and professional international trade logistics providers in managing current complex import processes.

As BMSB and other biosecurity risks spread across the world, more efforts and more resources will be needed to prevent incursions and disruption to Australia's international trade.

CLOSING COMMENT BY PAUL ZALAI

Our biosecurity system underpins our international reputation as an exporter of safe, quality and sustainable food and fibre. Our global customers seek Australian products because we do not have the destructive pests and diseases found in other parts of the world that can have such an impact on yield and nutrition.

While our farmers, fishers and foresters are major beneficiaries of our strong biosecurity system, our environment and the health and lifestyle of every Australian also relies on the system. Imports pose a significant risk, whether that is large consignments arriving on cargo ships, parcels or online shopping, or the general public flying back to Australia after an overseas holiday.

Close cooperation between government and industry is essential if we are to stay a step ahead of global threats.

It is important that the actions of government and industry are complementary and that we learn from one another so we can leverage effectiveness and avoid unintended consequences of regulation.

