

An update on fresh Strawberry imports from Japan

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Australia is one of 164 members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) who deals with the global rules of trade between nations. Its main function is to ensure that trade flows as smoothly, predictably and freely as possible. At its heart are the WTO agreements, negotiated and signed by the bulk of the world's trading nations and ratified in their parliaments.

Through these agreements, WTO members operate a non-discriminatory trading system that spells out their rights and their obligations. Each member receives guarantees that its exports will be treated fairly and consistently in other members' markets. Each member promises to do the same for imports into its own market.

There are two further stages that occur in a trading negotiation between two countries; an agreement on the terms of trade and the definition of rules governing market access for products which could present a risk to the biosecurity of the importing country.

Australian and Japan have a long history as trading nations, in fact Japan is our second largest export market and fourth largest source of foreign investment. The Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement (JAEPA), which entered into force on 15 January 2015, gives Australian exporters significantly improved market access in goods and services and substantially improves investment protections. Japan has a heavily protected agriculture market. Australia is the first significant agricultural producer to have a meaningful trade agreement with Japan, providing Australian exporters with a competitive advantage.

At the heart of the trading philosophy is the concept of reciprocity. For Australia to make gains in its trading relationship with another country it also has to allow access to its market for exports from the trading partner.

Japan made a formal request to the Australian Government for access into Australia of fresh Japanese grown strawberries. Under the terms of the WTO agreements, Australia is legally obliged to respond to that request.

Where possible, Australia must develop import conditions that are scientifically justified and that do not unnecessarily restrict trade. Where the risk of the imports cannot be reduced to an acceptable level, the Government will not permit them. Our trading partners use the same principles when assessing Australia's market access requests.

On 1 November 2017, the Government announced the start of a risk analysis process. A draft report from that risk analysis was published online on 6 June 2019 and a 60-day consultation period followed. Berries Australia and Strawberries Australia were consulted during this period. The final report was released on 7 February 2020 and is available at <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity/risk-analysis/plant/strawberries-from-japan>

The final report concludes that the importation of strawberries to Australia from all commercial production areas of Japan be permitted, subject to a range of biosecurity requirements which includes seasonal area freedom and very stringent screening for pests.

The final report recommends risk management measures, combined with operational systems, to ensure biosecurity standards are met. The recommended risk management measures will reduce the biosecurity risks to achieve the appropriate level of protection for Australia. Berries Australia provided significant input into the proposed risk management measures.

This report is purely an assessment of the biosecurity risk of the strawberry imports and has nothing to do with the commercial viability of the proposed import or even the potential impact on local growers.

It must be emphasised that this is only the first step in a long process and many commodities which are approved from an import risk assessment perspective are never actually imported into Australia due to commercial or operational reasons.

It is unlikely that Japanese strawberries will come into Australia in the near future, however we will continue to engage with the Department of Agriculture and will inform growers if Japan takes further steps in this direction.