Responding to exotic plant pests – Who's who, and what do they do?

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Following on from the introduction to biosecurity article in the Summer 2023 edition of the Australian Berry Journal, this article outlines what happens when an exotic plant pest or disease is detected in Australia, the general process that occurs following a detection and the broad principles behind how decisions are made will be explored in detail.

One of the central documents of the plant biosecurity system in Australia is the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed (EPPRD), commonly referred to simply as "the deed". The deed is a legally binding agreement between the Australian and state governments, many industry bodies, and Plant Health Australia (PHA).

The primary purpose of the deed is to allow for a more effective and timely response to emergency plant pest (EPP) detections. It provides a framework for the management of responses, including how they're funded, owner reimbursement costs for affected growers, and the role of signatories in a response. It allows for affected parties to be involved in decision making.

If an industry is affected by a new plant pest or disease and they are signatories to the deed, they are provided with a seat at the decision-making table, and the growers they represent are entitled to owner reimbursement costs for destruction of crops or property resulting from a response. In return the signatories agree to share the costs of the response.

When it comes to responding to an EPP incursion there are two key groups to be aware of:

Consultative Committee on Emergency Plant Pests (CCEPP)	National Management Group (NMG)
The CCEPP is the key technical advisory group which considers whether the pest in question is an EPP, whether it is feasible to eradicate, and whether it is cost beneficial to eradicate (i.e., the benefits of eradication outweigh the costs of doing so). Importantly, the CCEPP do not make decisions regarding the response, their role is specifically to review the technical information and recommend actions to the NMG	The NMG is responsible for decision making, including approval of response plans, funding, and deciding on whether a response should be initiated and continued. The NMG is composed of the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (Australian Government), heads of all state and territory departments of agriculture/primary industries, the president or chairperson of each affected industry, and the chair of PHA

Affected industries have a vote in both the NMG and the CCEPP. In addition, industries may support the response through the Industry Liaison Officer and Industry Liaison Coordinator roles. These industry positions provide insights to the team managing the response to help minimise impact to business continuity, provide industry perspective on response activities, and support communication and engagement activities.

Following detection of an EPP, the leader of the Australian Government plant biosecurity division, known as the Australian Chief Plant Protection Officer (ACCPO) convenes the CCEPP to assess the situation and come to an agreement on whether to recommend eradication, containment, or management. As there are several aspects of a response that are time sensitive the lead agency, which is the biosecurity agency of the state or territory where the pest was first located, may begin response activities before approval is received from the NMG. These include implementing immediate containment procedures and undertaking surveillance and tracing to determine the potential spread of the pest.

The lead agency is also responsible for developing a response plan detailing how the pest will be eradicated. The CCEPP provides a recommendation to the NMG on whether the response plan is technically appropriate and cost beneficial and the NMG endorses the response plan as-is or requests changes. Once approved it is the responsibility of the lead agency to implement the plan. The lead agency provides regular updates to the CCEPP and NMG who monitor the progress of the response.

Once a response begins it is not uncommon for the response plan to be updated multiple times as the situation evolves, and new information becomes available. The response plan must contain specific conditions, which if triggered, initiate a review. Each time the response plan is updated it is reviewed by the CCEPP who provide a recommendation to the NMG on whether to endorse the plan. The lead agency must operate within the current response plan until the NMG has endorsed the new plan.

There are two ways that an eradication program can end:

1. the pest is successfully eradicated, with extensive surveillance demonstrating proof of absence
2. the CCEPP recommends that eradication of the EPP is no longer technically feasible or cost beneficial. In this case the CCEPP may advise the NMG that the response enter a transition to management phase

Once the NMG approves the transition to management, the process of transitioning to management of the pest outside of the deed begins. Transition to management should address identified gaps in knowledge and information required to enable an orderly stand down from eradication to ongoing management of the EPP. This will assist industry, government, and the community to be best prepared for 'living with' or 'managing' the EPP. The success of an EPP response is dependent on many factors, including how early a new pest is detected after its arrival.

NSW GOVERNMENT

Keep an eye on future editions of the Australian Berry Journal for information on the exotic pests that threaten berries and what they look like, as well as things you can do to help protect your farm.

In the meantime, if you're keen to learn more the EPPRD can be read in full at **bit.ly/PHA-EPPRD** along with PLANTPLAN, a generalised framework for responding to emergency plant pests at **bit.ly/PHA-PLANTPLAN**

You can also explore a range of educational articles developed by Plant Health Australia and Berries Australia at our online RESOURCE LIBRARY. Visit berries.net.au/resource-library and type PHA in the Search box