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Weather eye

Harvest season review

A biosecurity nightmare



Biosecurity worries bring more sleepless nights

By Leigh Catley, Horticulture New Zealand

New Zealand's commercial fruit and vegetable growers have no shortage of issues to keep them lying awake at night.

The bank, the weather, the market, the exchange rate, the price of energy, petrol, fertiliser, water meters, frost fans ... what the kids are doing and will they take over the business all that good stuff.

And then there's biosecurity.

The risk to New Zealand horticulture from pest and disease incursions is so great, so significant and so downright costly, it doesn't just wake growers in the night, it has them breaking out in a cold sweat.

The problem with biosecurity, is it's a numbers game. It's all about managed risk.

MAF Biosecurity knows there are roughly 25 detections of *undeclared* potentially fruit-fly carrying material at the New Zealand border every day, about 9000 every year.

That's the risk horticulture lives with. The potential is there, 25 times a day, for a Queensland fruit fly to find a home in New Zealand, as it does on a regular basis in the supposedly 'fruit fly free' regions of Australia in Tasmania, South Australia and New South Wales.

When the Queensland fruit fly is detected here then our fresh fruit and vegetable market access into more than 100 countries is immediately

under threat, and may stay closed to us for a year or more. That's NZ\$2.5 billion at risk, every year.

As Horticulture New Zealand's chief executive Peter Silcock says, "it only takes one fruit fly".

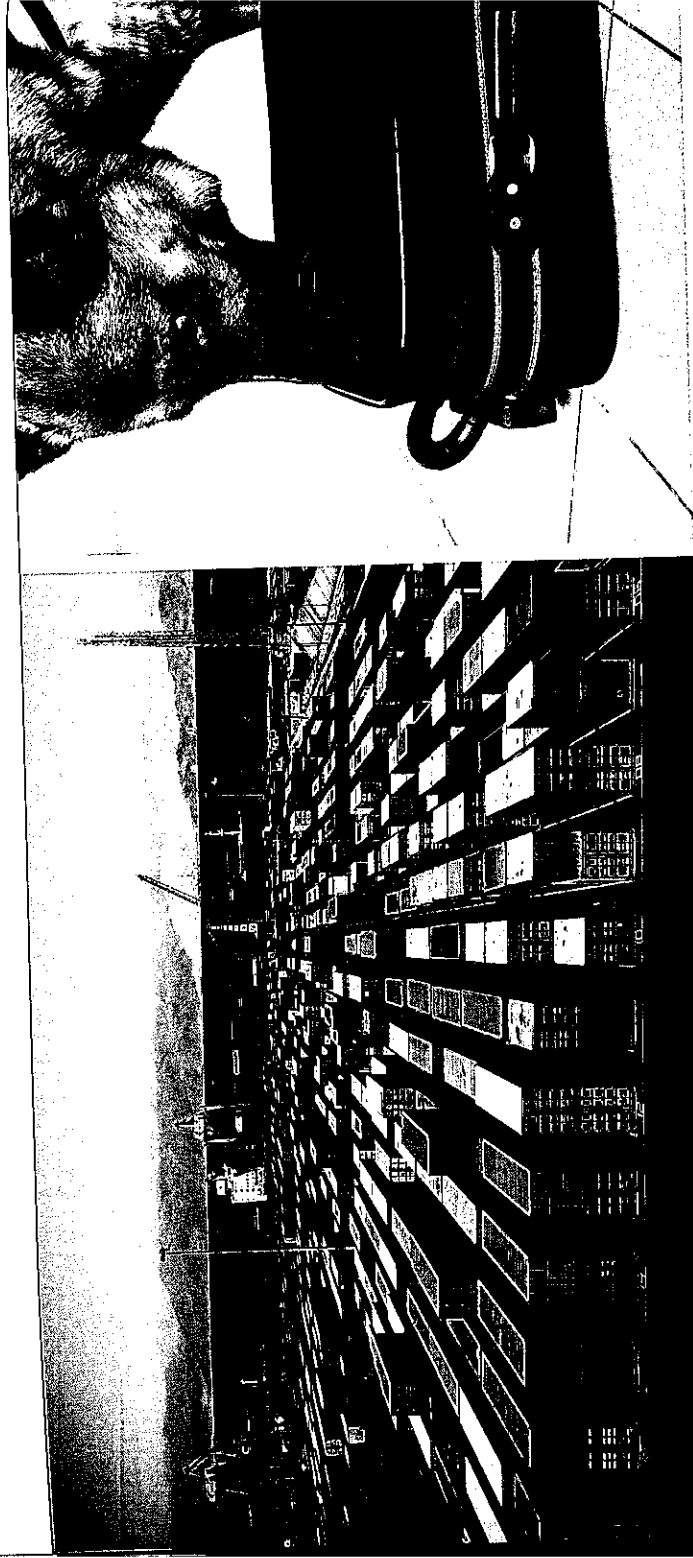
Agreeing to disagree

The Ministry of Agriculture has come up with a plan for how we manage this risk in the future.

The plan is called 'GIA' or 'Government Industry Agreements'. It means government and the primary industries will agree to joint decision making and funding of biosecurity readiness and response activity. This will involve the parties setting in place biosecurity plans and agreeing on what surveillance and preparedness is required and how we will respond to an incursion.

Last month the Primary Production Select Committee heard submissions from a variety of primary production representative groups, including Horticulture New Zealand and the Kiwifruit Growers Inc, on the proposed Biosecurity Law Reform Bill. One of the aspects of this new law is to allow the government to press ahead with GIA. A number of submitters opposed the principles of GIA.

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“The cost of cleaning up the painted apple moth incursion in 1999 was \$65 million. The question is, if the industry has just lost \$800 million, where is it going to find \$30 million to pay its ‘share’ of an eradication?”

Our response

Grower representative groups across the horticulture industry have met to discuss GIA. We support the aim of improving biosecurity outcomes through Government and Industry working together.

We desperately need a better biosecurity system and believe that joint decision making will lead to better biosecurity outcomes. The status quo is not acceptable and we are committed to exploring how we can get better biosecurity outcomes for the nation and the industry. We fully support the principle of joint decision making on readiness and response activity due to the impacts that new pests have on our member's livelihoods.

When it comes to cost sharing it needs to be recognised that growers are already

investing heavily in biosecurity and pest control as a result of biosecurity incursions. However we are yet to be convinced about the principles of GIA and out members see incursion response and readiness as a central government responsibility and function.

We have extensive experience with pest incursions – psa, hadda beetle, psyllid, guava moth, iris yellow spot virus, lettuce aphid, western flower thrip and the great white cabbage butterfly just to name a few. None of these pests have been eradicated and as a result the Industry is or has invested significant amounts in market access, science and pest management related costs.

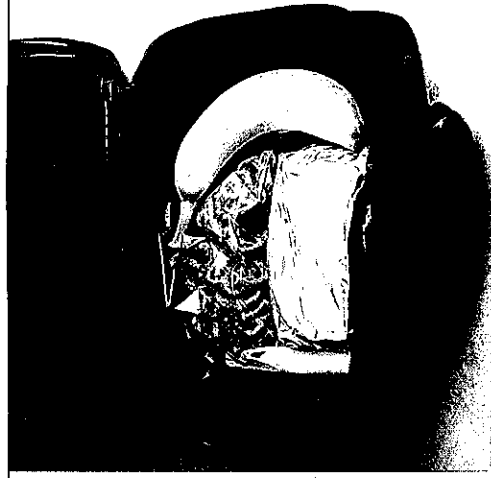
Peter Silcock told the select committee that the current situation is not good for horticulture, particularly our industry strategy of reaching \$10 billion in value by 2020.

But the industry has some significant concerns about the way the GIA is supposed to work, and just how much it will cost. Peter is also concerned that there are few, if any, sectors of horticulture that will even qualify for any more than 10% government funding support because their overall contribution to the economy is perceived to be too low.

The Costs

New Zealand's growers don't need to be told what a pest incursion can cost. It's not rocket science – when a pest is found, trade stops and money is lost. Never to be recovered.

Then there's the cost of the clean-up, or the cost of surviving without a clean-up – increased use of plant protection, developing new tools and finding new markets.



Painted Apple Moth.



"It only takes one fruit fly" - Peter Silcock.

Then there's the off-farm impact. How much does the community lose? The earnings, the suppliers, the downstream effects are almost impossible to quantify.

A study commissioned by HortNZ in 2006 showed the immediate financial impact of a serious med-fly incursion in the Bay of Plenty would be \$820 million and 3,500 jobs.

The cost of cleaning up the painted apple moth incursion in 1999 was \$65 million. The question is, if the industry has just lost \$800 million, where is it going to find \$30 million to pay its 'share' of an eradication?

Another Aussie model

GIA is based on an Australian model. The Australian agreement is called the "Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed."

In Australia the EPPRD or "The Deed", is administered by Plant Health Australia (www.planthealthaustralia.com.au). PHA is a public company specifically set up in 2000 administer and support the Deed (which became operational in 2005). The company is owned by more than 30 industry groups and the federal and state governments.

Funding for the PHA comes from membership subscriptions paid by all the members. Its budget for 08/09 was AUD\$4 million. The PHA also has the power to levy members to cover incursion costs.

PHA is entirely separate from the Australian Department of Agriculture, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) and Biosecurity Australia.

New Zealand's horticulture industry representatives are calling for a similar organisation to be set up here to administer the GIA. It needs to be a totally independent body so it can facilitate and mediate discussion between government and industry.

Now the industry is waiting to see how far the government is prepared to go to really make the GIA work, when so much talking has already been done, without much agreeing. 

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