A Sustainable RD&E System to Support National Plant Health

Report C: Principles for a sustainable model

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Purpose

The National Plant Biosecurity Research Development & Extension (RD&E) Strategic Implementation Committee and Plant Biosecurity Cooperative Research Centre (PBCRC) project on ‘A Sustainable Research Development & Extension System to Support National Plant Health’ seeks to identify an agreed pathway to an enduring plant biosecurity RD&E model, which extends beyond the current 5-10 year approach.


These reports provided the background for formal and informal consultation throughout 2015 with industry, research and government stakeholders. Consultation involved the Reference Committee and PBCRC Board, as well as representatives of industry, research organisations and government in both one-on-one conversations and workshops.

This report - A Sustainable Research Development & Extension (RD&E) System to Support National Plant Health Report C: Principles for a sustainable model – captures the key discussions, themes and priorities identified through this consultation.

It will provide the foundation of a discussion paper issued for further industry consultation in early 2016. The final document and recommendations will be taken to Government and stakeholders in mid-2016.
Context: the need

Faced with an increasingly complex global environment characterised by growth in tourism, passenger and cargo movements, as well as the potential for agriterrorism, the pressure on Australia’s biosecurity system is clear.

Likewise, the opportunity a strong biosecurity system affords in protecting existing markets and developing new markets is well acknowledged.

In particular, the strength of the biosecurity system will underpin successful expansion of agricultural production in Northern Australia, while providing an insurance for existing industry nationwide.

Stakeholders from across industry, research organisations and government understand the challenges and opportunities within the system itself, particularly with regard to Australia’s approach to biosecurity RD&E.

They see the drivers for reassessment and realignment of Australia’s approach to plant biosecurity RD&E as:

- Reduced investment available to RD&E – and specifically plant biosecurity RD&E, and following the conclusion of PBCRC in mid-2018
- Declining human capacity to support plant biosecurity research and science (technical capacity conduct biosecurity operations)
- Reduced extension services with those traditionally offered by the State and Territories to support agricultural production now largely delivered through private providers

Broad government and community recognition of, and support to address, these key challenges are demonstrated in statements from the Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity, the National Plant Biosecurity RD&E Strategy Implementation Committee, Senate Report into Environmental Biosecurity 2015, the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper and the National Commission of Audit 2013.

In particular the Senate Environmental and Communications References Committee Inquiry into Environmental Biosecurity (May 2015) recommended that the Department of Industry and Science:

- Develop a strategy to address the current, and projected, decline in the level of scientific expertise in areas relevant to biosecurity
- Conduct a review to prioritise Australia’s biosecurity research needs, both environmental and industry focused, and determine what long term institutional structure will best address them - in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Environment.

The Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper (2015) also encouraged government support of biosecurity, in particular to maintain and create new market access for Australian Agricultural exports.

Updating of the Rural RD&E Priorities included improved understanding and evidence of pest and disease pathways to best direct biosecurity resources, minimise biosecurity threats and improve market access for primary producers.

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**Clarity: the choices**

Stakeholder consultation involved discussion of many possible models for the future approach to biosecurity RD&E, and assumed that the national coordination, leadership and funding role currently fulfilled by PBCRC would not continue post 2018.

There is strong agreement that doing nothing presents a significant risk to the long-term strength of the biosecurity system that protects Australia’s plants.

The breadth of organisations involved in biosecurity RD&E is acknowledged, as is the need for enduring strategic coordination and leadership.

Stakeholders are keen to establish a clear scope for any future model. They are interested in a national coordination body that generates innovation and systematically delivers it to end-users.

They identify the cross-sectoral nature of plant biosecurity as a significant challenge within the current structures and systems, and many consider the investigation of a Research and Development Corporation (RDC) model as a worthwhile exercise. All agree addressing this cross-sectoral challenge in a systematic and efficient fashion is a priority.

Stakeholders agree that to maximise efficiencies and investment any future model should look to build on existing structures and systems. However, no one existing entity is seen to represent a viable option as it currently exists.

A reluctance to ‘build’ anything new or create any more duplication was a significant factor in discussions, as was consensus around the need to consider investigation of all existing and possible structures and organisations.

There is acknowledgement of assumed efficiencies in broadening the approach to encompass weeds and animals. However, most within the system see the inclusion of animals as an operational impossibility.

However, with the skills and expertise similar for both weeds and plants, and currently a general lack of focus on weeds and environmental biosecurity, support for exploration of a clearly defined combined approach is apparent.

There is universal agreement that industry must be a fully functioning partner in any future approach and that a critical test for any possible model is a genuine industry wide approach. Links to industry must be two-way, and address the significant gap in extension and adoption that has emerged in recent years. A future model must be focused on delivering of outcomes for industry and other end users.

However, while industry is an important partner in a sustainable approach to plant biosecurity RD&E, there are questions about whether industry’s capacity and ability to lead such a cross-sectoral initiative.

As a consequence, stakeholders from across the spectrum recognise that Australia’s future approach must continue to have the strong commitment of both Federal and State Governments, both departmentally and politically.

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While stakeholders recognise that resources are limited, there is general agreement that it is Commonwealth support that brings and holds any initiative together, and government involvement is imperative to any future approach to Australia’s plant biosecurity RD&E.

The reasons behind this are two-fold:

- Rural research and development typically aims to deliver a direct improvement in productivity or profitability to industry, and for plant biosecurity research, the ultimate outcome is protection. As the 2011 Productivity Commission stated ‘assuming that such government responsibilities arise due to market failures (for example, the large adverse impact for an entire industry that could result from a single importer bringing diseased plant or animal life into the country), then R&D to support policymakers’ activities is entirely consistent with the broader spillover rationale for public funding support.’

- Further to this, the on-going strength of Australia’s plant biosecurity system is vital to the market access enjoyed by our agricultural economy. Plant biosecurity RD&E to better protect agricultural production will support the current productivity and profitability momentum, and certified protection will ensure opportunities in new and emerging markets can be met.
Focus: the model

There is strong consensus amongst industry, research and government stakeholders of the need for a long term view of RD&E to protect Australia’s plant biosecurity, and with it - our unique environment and the market access that underpins a successful agricultural economy.

There is support for across industry reform, although agreement that the development of a new approach to plant biosecurity RD&E is the immediate priority.

Stakeholder consultation has identified seven principles for the development of an RD&E model that will support such protection into the long term.

These included:

1. **Leadership**
   A nationally coordinated approach to plant biosecurity RD&E would deliver the best outcome for industry and environment. A single entity is necessary to provide this leadership.

2. **Authority**
   A sustainable model requires the authority to drive the strategic direction of plant biosecurity RD&E and see outcomes delivered to industry.

3. **Scope**
   A future RD&E model must be cross-sectoral, cover the full biosecurity continuum, and consider the inclusion of weeds and environment.

4. **Step-change**
   A new model must tackle the cross-sectoral challenges, and step change may be required in order to achieve this. Any agreed future approach must have the ability to evolve without duplication, in efficiency or additional bureaucracy.

5. **Funding**
   To achieve national coordination there needs to be adequate government resource to bind participant coordination and provide a basis for leverage of funds.

6. **Efficiency**
   Existing structures and systems must be carefully considered to avoid duplication and maximise outcomes. No current entity presents a viable option.

7. **Urgency**
   Faced with increased external pressure, and growing gaps in capacity, the case for change is immediate. There is a need to lock in agency capacity with a national agreement.

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