

## **Plant Health Australia's response to the Australian Farm Institute Paper:**

*"Smart biosecurity science - A Sustainable Research Development and Extension System to Support National Plant Health."*

Plant Health Australia (PHA) welcomes the Australian Farm Institute (AFI) paper commissioned by the Plant Biosecurity Cooperative Research Centre (PBCRC).

PHA agrees that maintaining Australia's favourable biosecurity status is essential to support agriculture to compete in domestic and international markets. Strong, nationally-coordinated plant biosecurity RD&E is needed beyond the life of the PBCRC and PHA welcomes the discussion.

PHA has written this response to correct some aspects of the paper and comment on options proposed.

### **The current role of the CRC in plant biosecurity research**

The PBCRC's contribution to plant biosecurity research over its 13-year lifespan is commendable. The investments it has made in strategically important subject matter and in improving collaboration among researchers have brought benefits that will be felt into the future.

The contribution of the CRC must be seen in context. As the publisher of the National Plant Biosecurity Status Report since 2008, PHA collates plant biosecurity RD&E data from across Australia. This includes PBCRC projects, plus those from ACIAR, ARC, state and territory government, plant industries, CSIRO, relevant RDCs and 26 Australian universities. This data collection shows that between 80 and 85% of plant biosecurity RD&E projects undertaken in Australia occur outside of the PBCRC. If for whatever reason the CRC is not refunded or restructured, the impact on plant biosecurity RD&E that is carried out in Australia will not be critically diminished — other institutions will continue with their research programs in the absence of this structure, as will those industry parties currently engaged with the CRC, assuming that they continue to prioritise their RD&E.

Approximately \$6 million per year comes from the Australian Government to support the PBCRC. It is important that the total funding in the system supporting Plant Biosecurity RD&E is maintained. If this is not the case, then effective co-operation and collaboration in RD&E becomes more important.

An aspect overlooked in the paper is that the current PBCRC does not cover the full gamut of plant based research funding providers within Australia. While it has some governments, Horticulture Innovation and Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) as participants, the Centre lacks relationships with other governments and RDCs. For the record, PHA has members including all governments, CSIRO, PBCRC, Sugar Research Australia, Cotton RDC and Wine Australia as well as GRDC and Horticulture Innovation.

### **The role of PHA**

PHA was disappointed at some of the statements made in the AFI paper to support the argument that PHA is not suitable to take on national coordination of plant biosecurity RD&E. Some aspects, including information on funding, size, core skills and competencies, were underestimated or incorrect. PHA considers that the company is completely capable of taking on the role of national coordinator of RD&E and that there is much merit in the idea.

For example, PHA is currently managing the AGSOC Primary Industries cross sectoral plant biosecurity RD&E strategy and its implementation committee.

In addition to expertise in plant biosecurity, many current employees have come to PHA from related research backgrounds including researchers, academics, research managers, and from employment with industry, CSIRO, PBCRC and RDCs. The wealth of expertise among staff, together with their ability to facilitate collaboration across governments, industry and research organisations, is one of the reasons that PHA receives around \$5 million each year in additional project funding to advance biosecurity.

Another reason for the significant investment in the company is PHA's reputation as a facilitator and broker of partnership solutions to biosecurity issues. The company has formal linkages with the Australian Government, all states and territories governments and 36 peak industry bodies together representing \$30 billion in production.

PHA leads the way in coordinating most aspects of the plant biosecurity system and, given the importance of RD&E to all stakeholders, an effective plant biosecurity RD&E system has to meet the needs of all plant industries, as well as regulators and policy makers.

### **The way forward**

PHA agrees that doing nothing is not an option. There is too much at stake. RD&E funds must be prioritised and strategically targeted to make the most of research dollars.

The AFI paper's recommendation to establish a new structure to oversee plant biosecurity RD&E is, however, unnecessary and costly. Additional governance structures take funds away from RD&E. A new organisation is not needed as each of the plant based RDCs, CSIRO, ACIAR, governments and others that fund research already have accountability and reporting structures in place.

There is significant investment of around \$550 million per year of industry and Australian Government funds within the RDC system. The Australian government through the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper has delivered the \$200M Rural R&D for Profit Programme. Through this mechanism there is also \$50 million to boost Australia's emergency pest and disease eradication capability, \$50 million to give farmers better tools and control methods against pest animals and weeds, and \$200 million to improve biosecurity surveillance and analysis nationally, including in northern Australia. The Commonwealth Government is also supporting a new CRC on Developing Northern Australia which has as one of its R&D themes, biosecurity.

A more efficient solution would be to improve the current mechanisms for monitoring, influencing and coordinating research activities in a manner that allows opportunities for joint RD&E and cross sectoral cooperation.

In summary, Australia does need national plant biosecurity RD&E coordination, but PHA believes that existing structures and systems can be used effectively to do this.

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