

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

20th General Meeting

17 November 2020

Welcome, everyone, to the Annual General Meeting of Plant Health Australia on this historic milestone that marks 20 years of our company in operation. As Chairman, this marker of two decades of striving to strengthen Australia's biosecurity system gave me cause to reflect on the giant strides made by both the company and the plant biosecurity system over this period.

Two decades ago, PHA was formed to bring about the central vision contained in the 1996 Nairn Report, which was called *Australian Quarantine, a Shared Responsibility*. The review identified the lack of a central coordinating body to identify and address national priorities in plant health, and proposed the formation of such an organisation. In line with the overall partnership theme of the Nairn Review, it was proposed that such a body should incorporate wide industry and government representation as a means for progressing coordinated national leadership and direction on plant health issues.

PHA was incorporated in April 2000 with 16 government and plant industry members, and at 30 June 2001, the membership base had grown to include 23 members with a budget of \$1.6 million. We had just six staff members working to make the vision real, bolstered by committed government and industry partners who also believed in the benefits of a plant biosecurity partnership.

Now in 2020, PHA employs 35 skilled and experienced staff to advance the company's strategic aims on behalf of members and we are working with a budget that has increased more than ten-fold. We now consist of 58 member organisations, including the majority of peak industry bodies in cropping, as well as honey bees and truffles.

Our remit has grown and grown over this time, so that now we work with members to strengthen every aspect of plant biosecurity in Australia, and even internationally.

Let's consider the impact of one initiative that has arisen from our two decades of effort—the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed. Twenty years ago there was no overarching agreement on how plant pest incursions were dealt with. This meant that every time a new exotic pest was

discovered on our shores, decisions about the response, if any, were made on a case-by-case basis. Governments alone were left to cover the costs and industry had no seat at the table.

Now, in 2020, the Deed has been in place for 15 years – another significant milestone. There are 48 signatories, which provides an immense amount of certainty and security for us all, which is remarkable given how unpredictable biosecurity challenges are. The agreement and the procedures set out in PLANTPLAN allows an impressive level of coordination among the Parties to each incident, in part due to the prodigious amounts of training of stakeholders that PHA carries out, in preparation for the next incursion.

Now, it's hard to imagine dealing with a new pest without it. The provisions have evolved considerably and I'm sure it will continue to do so – there will never be a perfect agreement given the inherent differences in each situation – but the EPPRD and the cooperation embodied within, is without doubt, still the envy of the world.

I believe, and I hope you agree, that the success of PHA has been due to not just our efforts to be a highly professional and knowledgeable coordinator of the partnership. It is also due to the widespread conviction among our members that the biosecurity partnership is a valuable mechanism for safeguarding Australia. It is worth the effort. We can all see the benefits of the clearly articulated goals and responsibilities, of the training and outreach that keeps biosecurity top of mind, of the capacity building and preparedness initiatives, the supporting legislation, the grower levy mechanisms and all of the myriad aspects of the partnership that add up to make it far stronger than the sum of its parts.

The result has been a phenomenal increase in sophistication in the plant biosecurity system. You only have to look at the National Plant Biosecurity Status Report – all 270 pages of it – to get a sense of the complex ways we all work together to protect Australia. We are undoubtedly world leaders in plant biosecurity, and the resulting benefits will be felt for decades to come.

Looking back at the year of 2020 itself – it has been an interesting year to say the least, having to keep the plant biosecurity partnership and our work plan moving ahead in spite of all the obstacles that the COVID-19 pandemic put in our way. Everyone is to be congratulated for retaining cohesion and continuing to make considerable progress even though the partnership was almost entirely virtual.

2020 has been the International Year of Plant Health and while celebrations were lower key than expected, it gave us the chance to raise awareness of the importance of plant health among broader stakeholders.

2020 saw key staffing changes with Executive Director and CEO Greg Fraser bowing out after 12 years – an amazing achievement. I'm only sorry that we were unable to farewell him in person. Virtual interactions were an inadequate way to thank him for all that he achieved – both his leadership of PHA and his enormous contribution to the broader plant biosecurity system.

In early July, Sarah Corcoran commenced as CEO, bringing a wealth of experience to the role, with over 20 years working in biosecurity, including leading responses to exotic pest and disease incursions that have allowed her to bring a truly national approach to biosecurity. Her appointment marks a new era for the company, and in a rapidly changing world, Sarah enjoys the challenges and rewards from protecting plant health and keeping industries viable.

The PHA Board has retained its wealth of knowledge and provided valuable guidance throughout the year, and of course members will be voting on the nomination of Kathy Kelly for the board vacancy appointment later today, to bring the Board back up to full complement.

2020 was also, sadly, the year that we lost a valuable plant health advocate – Dr Kim Ritman, Australia's Chief Plant Protection Officer and Chief Scientist at the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. He passed away from injuries he received in a motor vehicle accident the year before. I am pleased to see that Kim's distinguished career and notable contribution to agricultural science is being honoured by the Department with a new Australian Biosecurity Award – the Dr Kim Ritman Award for Science and Innovation. That's a fitting legacy, but we will miss his passion and wisdom.

As 2020 draws to a close, PHA is working to revise many of the system's underlying strategies, to renew the aims, goals and targets we will all strive for in the new decade. The company's existing strategic plan, built around seven key result areas, will come to an end in 2021. Planning for the next strategic plan has commenced and we will be seeking feedback from our members to inform and shape the strategies for the next 5 years and beyond.

The overarching National Plant Biosecurity Strategy is also being revised, along with national plant biosecurity strategies for diagnostics, surveillance and preparedness which support implementation of the National Plant Biosecurity Strategy and the strategic goals of PHA.

The path towards a more coordinated and sustainable fruit fly management system to protect the future productivity and profitability of Australia's horticulture sector is now clearer with the release of the 2020–25 National Fruit Fly Strategy at a meeting of the National Fruit Fly Council last week.

The strategy is the result of a collaborative effort from Australia's horticultural industries, state governments, the Australian Government, Hort Innovation and various research institutions and provides a framework to advance fruit fly management in Australia. PHA is extremely proud to have brought together the contributions of these organisations into a unified national strategy which can meet the needs of the diverse industries and regions impacted by fruit fly.

I hope that the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic is now behind us, and we can begin working face to face with you again, to advance the new strategies. It is vital that we maintain focus and vigilance to protect us all.

On behalf of the Board, I'd like to thank PHA's capable and committed staff members who maintain an impressive rate of output to achieve PHA's strategic aims and annual work plan in the interests of a stronger plant biosecurity system.

I am also grateful for the continued engagement of all of you, our members, in advancing this crucial work that protects so much of the Australian way of life.

Thank you for your virtual attendance today.

Steve McCutcheon

Chairman, PHA