

18 July 2005

Mr Peter Corish
Chair
Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group
GPO Box 858
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Mr Corish

RE: Invitation to make a submission to the Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group as outlined in your letter dated 30 May 2005.

I make this brief submission consistent with Plant Health Australia's (PHA's) vision, which is "To assist development of an internationally outstanding plant health management system that enhances Australia's plant health status and the sustainability and profitability of plant industries." Further details of PHA's strategic direction and planned activities for the 2005-2006 year can be found in the **attached** documents: the PHA Corporate Plan 2003-2008 and the Annual Operating Plan 2005-2006.

The PHA membership comprises the Australian Government, all State and Territory governments, and the following plant industry peak bodies:

- Apple and Pear Australia Ltd.
- Australian Banana Growers' Council
- Australian Citrus Growers' Inc.
- Australian Cotton Growers' Research Association Inc.
- Australian Honey Bee Industry Council
- Australian Macadamia Society Ltd
- Australian Mango Industry Association
- Australian Nut Industry Council
- Australian Plantation Products and Paper Industry Council (A3P)
- Australian Vegetable and Potato Growers' Federation (AUSVEG)
- Avocados Australia
- CANEGROWERS
- Cherry Growers of Australia Inc
- Grains Council of Australia
- Growcom Australia
- Nursery and Garden Industry Australia
- Ricegrowers' Association of Australia
- Strawberries Australia
- Summerfruit Australia Inc.
- Winemakers' Federation of Australia

The PHA associate membership comprises:

- Australasian Plant Pathology Society

AWB Services
BSES Ltd
Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
Grains Research and Development Corporation
Horticulture Australia Limited

PHA supports the importance of biosecurity in Australian agriculture identified in the issues paper. Biosecurity is critical to the ongoing competitive advantage and sustainability of the Australian plant industries, as is clearly recognised by PHA members through the formation and continuing support of the company. Through PHA and individually PHA members are working towards an internationally outstanding National Plant Health System, and while significant progress has been made to date, there are a number of priority plant health issues identified by PHA members to address. Priority areas of the National Plant Health System are also integral components of the National Biosecurity Strategy being developed by the Primary Industries Ministerial Council.

This submission outlines some key achievements of PHA to date and the ongoing programs that aim to address the company's Corporate Plan.

Improving incursion management systems

The Emergency Plant Pest (EPP) Response Deed is the world's first formal industry/government cost sharing agreement in the plant sector, negotiated between PHA members. The agreement will provide plant industries with far greater involvement in incursion decision making, including biosecurity and risk reduction measures, and remove current uncertainties and disincentives for growers to report suspected EPPs. Currently the deed has been ratified by five governments, including the Australian Government and ten plant industry members. When all governments have ratified the agreement it will become active.

PLANTPLAN, Australia's first ever national emergency plant pest preparedness and response plan, has been developed by PHA to underpin the EPP Response Deed. PLANTPLAN provides documented policy and guidelines for the consistent management of EPP responses by appropriately trained personnel across all jurisdictions. The national training program for EPP responses is near completion and will include accredited units and non-competency based training for government and plant industry personnel.

Risk mitigation for Australia's plant industries – Industry Biosecurity Plans

PHA has developed a national framework for biosecurity risk identification and mitigation for Australia's plant industries. In developing these Industry Biosecurity Plans for each plant industry, PHA brings together a standing group of key representatives and experts from industry, governments, Research and Development corporations and other relevant parties to identify priority pests and develop strategies to manage biosecurity risks from the national to farm gate level.

Using this framework PHA has finalised and launched banana, citrus, sugar and rice biosecurity plans, completed plans for viticulture, grains and the nursery and garden industry, and is nearing completion or developing plans for remaining PHA member industries. PHA is developing a review strategy to work with members to annually review the plans, and where necessary update biosecurity measures in response to changing risks. Ongoing review of biosecurity plans will allow a mechanism for continued prioritisation and management of biosecurity risk to the plant industries involving all industry and government stakeholders.

Surveillance and monitoring

PHA is working with members to develop a nationally coordinated, effective and efficient surveillance system. Work to date has included the first comprehensive national stocktake of surveillance and monitoring activities, clarification of roles and responsibilities nationally and the development and testing of tools

(including a national surveillance template) for individual members to use in sector/jurisdiction specific surveillance strategies.

Diagnostics development and coordination

PHA has commissioned the development of diagnostic standards for around 50 high priority EPPs, to ensure a single agreed protocol is available for use in the event of an incursion. The value of such pre-emptive standards was recently demonstrated when Pakistan rejected an Australian wheat consignment alleging contamination by a serious quarantine pathogen. A diagnostic standard test was available for the pathogen (commissioned by PHA and developed by two PHA member agencies) and was used to rapidly rebut claims and thus maintain the value of the consignments.

PHA is also developing a national diagnostic network and associated laboratory accreditation scheme for plant diagnostic facilities. This system is being designed to allow a strategic and national approach to maintaining diagnostic services in Australia, and in particular address the budgetary and succession planning challenges that this sector faces in the coming years.

Communication and biosecurity awareness

PHA runs the National Plant Health Awareness Campaign, which targets commercial plant producers with the message **Look. Be Alert. Call an Expert**. This call to action urges producers to develop and maintain their vigilance and to take action if they spot anything unusual in their crops, thereby helping to protect Australia's plant industries with a gross value of \$18 billion.

PHA is also finalising a package of training and awareness material that can be used by PHA members to promote good biosecurity and awareness of the key aspects of the National Plant Health System. Materials have been developed to target a range of audiences including industry leaders and government officials, agricultural consultants and agronomists, producers and the community at large.

Specific responses to questions

The issues paper raises two specific questions on biosecurity. In response to the first question (opportunities to improve the risk management approach), a significant component of this in the plant industries is the Industry Biosecurity Planning process PHA has developed, as described above. This provides a mechanism for all relevant stakeholders to systematically assess risks and develop and implement risk management strategies in the plant industries.

The biosecurity risk management framework includes the following elements:

- > threat and risk identification, including assessments of pathways;
- > facilitating and/or implementing cost beneficial post-border surveillance, monitoring, detection and awareness programs;
- > development of biosecurity measures at the national, regional and farm level;
- > development of a comprehensive and effective diagnostic network (both national and international);
- > effective incursion response programs supported by a shared understand of responsibilities, effective training and optimisation of available infrastructure and resources;
- > identifying gaps and development of R&D activities to support plant health initiatives;
- > appropriate awareness and communication activities; and
- > ensuring the retention of the plant health skills base.

In response to the funding question, I highlight the significant investment by PHA members in the operations of the company to date. Since incorporation in 2000, PHA members have contributed subscription funding totalling \$1.5 million annually. Furthermore the Australian Government invested \$7 million over 4 years through a budget initiative (formally ceasing in 2004). The Grains Research and Development Corporation and Horticulture Australia Ltd have also invested significantly in specific programs, particularly Industry Biosecurity Plans, and have committed significant funding to future activities of the company (see attached Annual Operating Plan).

PHA believes that the partnership model of the company has many and clear benefits, particularly the engagement of all affected stakeholders and the leveraging opportunities among PHA members of any investments in plant health.

The Commonwealth Budget Initiative funding was particularly significant in this regard, acting as seed investment and a catalyst for projects working in conjunction with state government and industry members. Continued investment by the Australian Government in PHA via this model in particular would offer significant benefits to plant industry biosecurity, with outcomes involving and supported by all stakeholders and equitable contributions by concerned parties.

Concluding comments

In conclusion PHA urges the reference group to continue to reinforce the importance of biosecurity to the sustainability and competitiveness of the plant industries in Australia. Without a high level of biosecurity in the plant industries, the production and quality of Australian produce would become increasingly compromised, reducing the competitive edge in domestic and international markets. The many pests and diseases currently absent from Australia could not only impact market access, but reduce overall production and increase ongoing management costs, making some industries economically unsustainable.

Further information on PHA can be found on our website at www.planthealthaustralia.com.au including project information and reports, information systems, corporate documents, news releases, upcoming events and links to members PHA's.

If you have any further queries please don't hesitate to contact Project Officer Dr Ryan Wilson on (02) 6260 4322 or (ryan@phau.com.au).

Yours sincerely

[[signed]]

Neil Fisher

Chief Executive Officer