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Biosecurity Council visit to Kununurra August 2019

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Biosecurity Council visit to Kununurra

8 – 11 August 2019

Background

In late 2018, the Biosecurity Council committed to holding regional meetings, possibly annually. The intent of regional meetings are to:

- Engage with local/regional stakeholders on biosecurity matters
- Build networks/relationships with key biosecurity stakeholders
- Provide a conduit to government/agencies for local/regional biosecurity stakeholders.

Council agreed to hold its first regional visit in Kununurra, located in the East Kimberley. The East Kimberley, has a unique set of biosecurity challenges — Kununurra is an important horticulture growing region, there is a large pastoral presence, it adjoins the Northern Territory (NT) border and is in close proximity to Indonesia, it is a hub for tourism during the dry season, it is a biodiversity hotspot and there is growing development such as the expansion of the irrigation area, major aquaculture projects and increasing number of sea-going vessels. Further, the area is free from many pests and diseases found elsewhere in WA and/or the rest of Australia, and was recently involved in a major biosecurity response to the exotic disease, citrus canker.

The Biosecurity Council visited Kununurra from 8 – 11 August 2019.

Itinerary

Thursday 8 August. Council held its quarterly workshop to discuss the key areas of advice it is working on.

Friday 9 August. Council held its quarterly meeting, including the following presentations:

- East Kimberley biosecurity update – John Paul Slaven, Biosecurity Officer, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD)
- Biosecurity in the Kimberley – David Chemello, District Conservation Coordinator (East Kimberley), Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA)

- Kimberley Development Commission – RDC role...and biosecurity – Andrew Beer, Manager Research Analysis and Economics, Kimberley Development Commission
- The Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy: A biosecurity frontline – Cassandra Wittwer, Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy veterinary officer, Department of Agriculture.

Friday 9 August. Biosecurity stakeholders were invited to meet with Council to discuss their views on the status of biosecurity in WA and any biosecurity-related concerns. Invitations were sent to a range of stakeholders. Clashes with a major meeting in Fitzroy Crossing and Local Government Week meant a number of stakeholders were unavailable. Nevertheless, a good mix of stakeholders met with Council including:

- Kimberley Rangelands Biosecurity Association
- Project Seadragon
- Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley
- Cambridge Gulf Ltd.
- Ord Irrigation Cooperative
- Ord Mango Growers Association
- Kimberley Produce.

Saturday 10 August. Council toured DPIRD's Frank Wise Institute, guided by DPIRD Principal Research Officer (Tropical agriculture), Dr David McNeil. Dr McNeil provided an overview of the biosecurity practices on the research station and discussed the research trials being undertaken, including biosecurity implications.

Council visited the Kununurra checkpoint, where Kenneth Bin Jacob discussed the role of the checkpoint and processes used by checkpoint staff. The visit provided Council with the opportunity to discuss the checkpoint operations, view the facilities, meet checkpoint staff and see the checkpoint in action.

Sunday 11 August. Council returned to Perth.



Key biosecurity issues

The departmental presentations, stakeholder meetings and field visits provided excellent opportunities for Council to discuss the biosecurity of the East Kimberley region with people that are 'on the ground'. Key challenges, specific issues and opportunities were identified that Council believe warrant further investigation by government agencies. These are discussed below.

1. **Staffing levels.** Undertaking effective surveillance and eradication campaigns in the East Kimberley is difficult, with staff enduring difficult terrain and climatic conditions. Low (qualified) staff numbers puts additional pressure on current staff, impacts the ability of department/s to undertake effective local eradication activities (which may need to continue over the long-term, particularly for weed eradication) and limits the department's ability to collaborate with local industries/groups on biosecurity activities. Further, external funding for weed eradication programs is being provided on an annual basis, which does not ensure financial security for these long-term programs.

The East Kimberley contains one of Australia's 15 biodiversity hotspots, has important horticulture and pastoral industries and the impressive, unique landscape is a major drawcard for tourism. Consequently, appropriate investment by Government in the region's biosecurity is justified. This includes adequate staff numbers, with appropriate licences, to effectively undertake the necessary activities (and reviewing activities to determine what is necessary – e.g. the appropriateness of the Queensland fruit fly (QFly) trapping program in Kununurra was questioned, given that the dominant species of fruit fly (*Aquilonis*) cannot be distinguished from QFly).

2. **Use of technology.** Surveillance and eradication is a resource-intensive activity in the East Kimberley hampered by the terrain and environmental conditions¹. There are various technologies that can be investigated to improve efficiencies, such as remote-sensing technologies and bio-controls.

Conversely, there were differing views on community reporting technologies such as MyPestGuide, with some viewing them as less useful whilst others felt community awareness and reporting was critical. The specific issues highlighted to Council were predominately related to the agency resources required:

- Potential increase in the number of reports that Kununurra-based staff would need to follow-up
- The time and effort required to undertake field visits to confirm suspicion (travel time and difficulties of the terrain/climate); and
- Lack of available staff to undertake field visits.

¹ Noting that environmental conditions can impact the ability of staff to undertake field work (e.g. heat or storms); as well as affecting the life-cycle or behaviours of weeds/animals meaning that surveillance timing can be critical.

3. Collaboration. The isolation of the East Kimberley and proximity to the NT appears to have necessitated active collaboration by government departments based in the region, as well as in the neighbouring NT. Working together to address specific pest threats and sharing of resources (e.g. helicopters) was evident. However, it was acknowledged that more could be done. There are three government agencies all operating in the region on similar programs and promoting similar biosecurity messages (DPIRD, DBCA and Department of Agriculture). Opportunity exists for increased consistency in messaging/promotion of biosecurity for greater effect.
4. Biosecurity messaging. Further to the collaborative effort on biosecurity messaging noted above, a key message that is missing is a common vision for biosecurity in northern WA that cuts across tenures and borders. The importance of having WA communities, producers, pastoralists, interstate governments, interstate industries, tourists etc. understand why Western Australia has border biosecurity and the importance of this to Western Australia's industries and environment was a recurring theme heard by Council. The activities already in place (e.g. checkpoint, signage, airport messages, quarantine dogs etc.) all help, but they need to be maintained, reviewed and refreshed.
5. Cross-border movements: Cross-border movements are of particular concern to the East Kimberley community. Although there is the Kununurra checkpoint, there are numerous unregulated road pathways. These unregulated pathways are being increasingly used by tourists as well as by pastoralists moving cattle. Although it is difficult to provide concrete evidence on the risk that the use of these unregulated pathways present, they are a risk pathway for pests and diseases — and stakeholders suggested that people do use these roads to deliberately avoid the checkpoint to import agricultural product. In addition, a major aquaculture venture (Project Seadragon) is in development. This development will operate across the NT and WA border to transport product (prawns) from the NT to a processing plant in WA and will require cross-border protocols to mitigate biosecurity risk. Further cross-border movements occur from the natural movement of feral animals and weeds from the NT into Western Australia, requiring ongoing surveillance by landholders and agency staff.
6. Ord River Irrigation Area (ORIA) biosecurity group and biosecurity plan. All of the stakeholders involved in the Kununurra horticulture industry that Council spoke to were extremely supportive of:
 - a. Reviewing the 'OrdGuard Regional Biosecurity Plan'; and
 - b. Getting an ORIA/Kununurra biosecurity group recognised by the Minister for Agriculture and Food.

This highlights the importance of biosecurity to the horticulture industries in the region, and suggests that the timing is right for DPIRD to facilitate/support the industry in these endeavours. On the other hand, information provided to Council by DPIRD advises that DPIRD had offered the industry funding to develop a biosecurity plan, which fell through; and that DPIRD is supportive of an 'ORIA biosecurity group'

forming. The conflicting messages suggest that DPIRD should further discuss the options with the ORIA industries.

7. Genetically modified (GM) cotton as a weed. The introduction of GM cotton is a new area that will require vigilant monitoring. GM cotton being grown in the ORIA has been modified so that it is resistant to insect attack and herbicides. There is the risk that plants may grow outside plantings and present a biosecurity threat to other horticultural industries and the natural environment.
8. Increasing sea-going vessels. There is expected to be a growing number of vessels at the Wyndham Port. Further, the port operators are expecting to be required to dispose of international waste from vessels. Although the port is under Commonwealth jurisdiction, it is prudent to monitor the risk this pathway might present to Western Australia's biosecurity. The barge from Darwin to Kalumburu was highlighted as another example.