QUESTION ON NOTICE
No. 809
Asked on Thursday, 24 May 2007

MR WENDT asked the Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries (MR MULHERIN)-

QUESTION:

What is the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries doing to ensure early detection of any new plant pests in Queensland?

ANSWER:

Early warning surveillance activities as part of the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries' (DPI&F) Plant Biosecurity program increases Queensland's chances of early detection of emergency plant pests and diseases, thus maximising the possibilities for effective response and eradication.

DPI&F has a network of plant health scientists based in Cairns, and inspectors based in regional centres, who undertake regular scheduled surveys throughout the state in high-risk targeted areas for pests and diseases of concern to agriculture. Biosecurity Queensland's plant health surveillance work for the 2006-07 financial year to date has resulted in surveillance for emergency plant pests and diseases on over 1 100 properties throughout Queensland.

One of the main challenges in the early warning survey program is to protect Queensland from invasion of pests from nearby countries to our north. To assist in meeting the challenge, DPI&F has the Northwatch scientific team based in Cairns. The group is responsible for undertaking surveillance, primarily in remote areas of Cape York Peninsula and Torres Strait, and in high-risk urban centres of north Queensland. This surveillance aims to ensure early detection of unwanted exotic pests and diseases of both animals and plants that could arrive from nearby countries such as Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.

The Northwatch program is a biosecurity initiative of DPI&F and was established in 1998 to enhance our preparedness for exotic pest and disease threats. Staff involved in implementing the Northwatch program includes both animal and plant scientists and support staff from DPI&F's Biosecurity Queensland.

In the past 12 months, Northwatch officers have conducted surveys on Cape York Peninsula, Torres Strait, the Gulf of Carpentaria and Cairns. No emergency plant pest incursions were detected during these surveys. This is a tangible demonstration of DPI&F's commitment to early warning detection of new plant pests.

Another targeted early warning surveillance program undertaken by DPI&F includes the hazard site surveillance project. This project operates in the Brisbane area and is part of a national program that includes trapping and surveys for new pests and diseases in and near businesses that import high-risk products and at other high-risk locations such as seaports, airports, grain storage locations and rubbish dumps. The project has been operating since December 2005 and this year has resulted in trapping and inspection across 58 hazard sites in the Brisbane area, with no detections of new pests occurring as a result of these surveys.

Targeted early warning surveys are also undertaken for a range of pests of concern to trading partners as part of area freedom surveillance programs. These inspections are conducted in production areas and other high-risk areas to provide early warning of arrival of new pests into Queensland, and to maintain market access for Queensland's plant products by demonstrating that pests of concern to our trading partners are absent from Queensland.

One of the major risks to Queensland agriculture, despite the presence of the endemic Queensland fruit fly, remains the potential for invasion of exotic fruit fly species such as melon fly and papaya fruit fly. DPI&F maintains a network of fruit fly traps in high risk port and seaport locations in Queensland as part of a national early warning program for exotic fruit fly. Over 400 traps throughout the state are checked fortnightly to determine if any exotic species have been caught. The program has operated since 1996 and aims to prevent a recurrence of the 1995 outbreak of papaya fruit fly in Cairns.