

Question on Notice

No. 759

Asked on 15 June 2021

MS C LUI ASKED MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT AND FISHERIES AND MINISTER FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES (HON M FURNER)—

QUESTION:

Will the Minister advise how the government is supporting the Queensland banana industry?

ANSWER:

The Queensland banana industry accounts for approximately 94 per cent of Australia's banana production, with almost all of that in North Queensland. Banana farming is centred around the Cassowary Coast region (Tully, Innisfail and Kennedy), the Atherton Tablelands, and at Lakeland, north of Cairns. The gross value of production for bananas in Queensland is forecast at \$517 million in 2020-21.

Bananas, like other horticultural industries, have been impacted by difficulties sourcing a seasonal workforce due to the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. However, the Pacific Labour Scheme and Seasonal Worker Program have assisted the banana industry by providing 603 workers to work on banana farms in Bundaberg, the Tablelands, Mareeba, Cassowary Coast and Cook Shire regions. These workers have worked across approximately 28 properties since commencement of the scheme.

The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) has progressed a new five-year National Banana Extension Program to benefit the banana industry. It is focussed on providing up-to-date information on biosecurity management, providing a fast link from research results to best practice management, and giving growers confidence in the adoption of the recommended practices. A key part of the project is the one-on-one extension strategy. In the first phase of the extension strategy, the DAF project team completed 109 farm visits, 71 of these included conversations with growers as part of a survey to improve understanding of farming operations, grower and industry priorities, source ideas for on-farm innovation trials as well as gaining insight into how growers source information.

New banana varieties produced from tissue culture variations have been tested in the Northern Territory and in North Queensland to assess for disease resistance and commercial viability. Around 40 improved variants of three different resistant parents have been selected to proceed to the next phase of testing.

The Queensland Government has invested heavily in efforts to contain Panama Disease Tropical Race 4 (Panama TR4), which is a soil-borne fungal disease present in Far North Queensland and the Northern Territory, that impacts bananas. It was first detected in Queensland in March 2015 and has been confirmed on five properties over the following six years. In recognition of the importance of the banana industry to the Queensland economy, the Queensland Government committed almost \$42 million to its response to the outbreak. Since the initial detection, the Queensland Government, banana growers and the Australian Banana Growers' Council have worked together to successfully manage the spread of the disease. In 2019, Government and the Australian Banana Growers' Council signed a Cost Sharing Deed and Memorandum of Understanding to share in the funding, governance and delivery of the

Program to June 2023. The focus for the parties to 2023, is to maintain a world leading control and containment program for Panama TR4 and transition the leadership of the disease management to industry.

Feral pigs have been highlighted as a potential vector for the spread of Panama TR4 as they visit banana farms to wallow and feed. A Feral Pig Management Strategy and coordinated program has been undertaken, aimed at increased landholder participation in feral pig control. The feral pig program was coordinated by the Cassowary Coast Regional Council and delivered in partnership with DAF, the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, the Department of Environment and Science, the Federal Department of Defence and the banana and sugar industries.

Landholders and land managers in the Tully, Murray and Johnstone catchments are supported through capacity building, including training and awareness of best practice control techniques including monitoring, trapping, baiting and shooting of feral pigs. Recent studies found feral pigs in the Cassowary Coast Region have a very low tendency to move beyond catchments where they range.