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As Australian agriculture moves into premium markets, the biosecurity risks increase

Australian farmers have always understood the importance of biosecurity as a key success factor in securing the international markets the sector is so dependent on. Major campaigns to eradicate TB and brucellosis in livestock, as well as to prevent the outbreak of potentially devastating diseases like Karnal bunt in wheat have been well supported by the sector, and are a very important factor in the global market access enjoyed by Australian agricultural exports.

However, some recent research conducted for the Plant Biosecurity Cooperative Research Centre by the Australian Farm Institute highlighted that the importance of biosecurity to Australian agriculture is increasing, for two reasons.

The first is that Australian agricultural products are increasingly being exported to higher value markets, in which wealthier consumers are prepared to pay a premium for quality and safety, and also for specific providence and credence characteristics. These consumers are, however, ‘fussier’ than the average consumer, and any breakdown in biosecurity standards will result in a very sudden and quick loss of these premium markets, with larger economic impacts than might be the case in lower value markets.

The second is that as Australia has negotiated trade agreements with major trading partners, the opportunity arises to greatly reduce the paperwork and inspection costs associated with exporting to those markets. In theory, export markets start to accept Australian inspection and quality assurance standards, and reduce their own inspections and paperwork. However, this requires Australia to be able to demonstrate that our biosecurity and quality assurance systems are credible, and will stand up to close scrutiny by officials visiting from export markets. This means it is no longer good enough for Australia to claim freedom from particular pests and diseases, we in fact have to demonstrate that there are active surveillance and inspection systems in place to make sure the pest or disease is not present.

As the report produced for the Plant Biosecurity CRC concluded, these changes mean that Australia needs to more actively address biosecurity risks, and importantly ensure that a dedicated research effort is maintained to solve existing and emerging biosecurity challenges, as well as provide a training ground for technicians and scientists that will be needed to maintain Australia's world-leading biosecurity standards into the future.

Image: AWB