

Submission to;

Legislative Council Government Administration Committee 'B' sub committee inquiry into  
BLUEBERRY RUST.

To the Members of the Committee:

Hon Rosemary Armitage MLC, Member for Launceston  
Hon Ivan Dean MLC, Member for Windermere  
Hon Kerry Finch MLC, Member for Rosevears  
Hon Tania Rattray MLC, Member for McIntyre  
Hon Josh Willie MLC, Member for Elwick

From;

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In reference to;

1. The actions taken by Biosecurity Tasmania to address the 2014 and 2016 outbreaks of Blueberry Rust; (These items are in relation to the 2016 outbreak only)

In regards to the 2014 outbreak;

- Why did Biosecurity Tasmania not attempt to create a list of known blueberry growers. At last glance Trish MacFarlane of Holwell has identified about 80 farms with commercial interests in growing blueberries. This information is essential in managing an outbreak and keeping an industry informed.

In regards to the 2016 outbreak;

- Blueberry growers first heard about the new outbreak through the news media instead of from Biosecurity Tasmania. Even though we had been being inspected by Biosecurity Tasmania annually since 2014.
- Biosecurity Tasmania has received multiple reports generated by a number of different people saying that under the right conditions Blueberry Rust can be eradicated. A number of these reports were collated and presented to Biosecurity Tasmania by Karen Brock, Brocklands.
- One report from Rose Daniels of DPI NSW we personally heard presented at the May 2017 FGT conference. During this presentation, and we questioned her on it, she stated after 2 weeks 75% of Blueberry Rust spore is non-viable and that after 4 weeks 100% of the spore is dead. Blueberry Rust only really survives on the retained leaves on evergreen plants. When directly asked she said once blueberry plants dropped their leaves Tasmania's climate would kill the rust.
- Biosecurity Tasmania has heavily relied on a single report from Dr Strich to inform their decision making. Dr Strich is a paid consultant for Costas and has never published a paper relating to funguses let alone one on the Blueberry Rust fungus. How could this be seen as an unbiased, knowledgeable source of information.
- Dr Klump of Biosecurity Tasmania is recorded in Hansard records on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June that he had been speaking to Rose Daniels that day and she recanted and said Blueberry Rust could not be eradicated. Karen Brock at a meeting of growers on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June stated she had just that morning been speaking to Rose and Rose said she had not spoken to Lloyd Klump and that she still believed that Blueberry Rust could be eradicated in Tasmania.
- In December 2016 Biosecurity officers Colin Spry and Rae Burrows reported to a meeting of growers that the outbreak was under containment protocols and that the property was being inspected at random intervals weekly. Containment was said to involve no movement off the property without prior decontamination.

- Why has the containment protocol changed. Rachel has found video evidence on Facebook showing pickers working at Costas, Sulphur Creek (the site of the 2016 outbreak), wearing their own clothes, hats and shoes. Which they obviously wore on and off the property.
- At the December meeting Chris May a farmer involved with the 2014 outbreak presented research papers that showed Blueberry Rust could be eradicated without killing/destroying infected plants. Copies of which he provided to the DPIPWE representatives present.
- NSW has been infected with Blueberry Rust for over 14 years during which time, according to Rose Daniels of DPI NSW, the infection has only spread to an area covering 50km. If the rust is properly contained it can be eradicated as it doesn't spread over large areas quickly.
- The initial importation of Blueberry Rust to Australia is reported to be on a growers clothes after a visit to Spain. For distances longer than a couple of kilometres by far the most probable vector for infection is people and their equipment.
- Biosecurity Tasmania failed dismally to identify the blueberry industry in Tasmania. They simply relied on FGT to do their work for them. As such FGT having about 6 growers was deemed to be the whole industry. This despite the fact they were already inspecting over 19 different growers for Blueberry Rust and there now being over 80 growers identified that have a commercial interest in growing blueberries.
- FGT's position as an industry representative body has been corrupted by the actions of Phil Pyke. It has been reported to us by Greg McCulloch that during a phone conference on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December with Phil, that Phil was sending him SMSs with the message stuff the growers were going with Costas.
- The lack of communication from BT and Phil's indifference to smaller growers, was exposed in March 2017 when Rachel de Wit had to hear on the grape vine that 2 more farms had rust. When asked face to face at a meeting on or about 24<sup>th</sup> of March what he knew, Phil said that he was aware of the new infections and requested Rachel to not tell other growers. At the May FGT conference grower Trish MacFarlane directly asked Phil about the 2 new infections and he flat out denied knowing about it.
- BT's last update to blueberry growers was at a meeting in December. No further information was forthcoming until Rachel de Wit directly asked Jeremy Rockliff at the May FGT conference, whether he knew anything about the new infections, to which he stated 'No'. This shows a major break down of communication between BT or the DPIPWE Secretary and the Minister.
- BT's failure to even update the few growers they knew about from December to May makes it hard for us to trust that the outbreak was being dealt with properly in an open and above board way.
- BT allowing Andrew Bishop and Lloyd Klump to be on leave at the same time during the initial stages of the outbreak of a new disease in Tasmania is incomprehensible.
- BT commissioned a report from Macquarie-Franklin regarding the potential socio-economic affect of the Blueberry Rust outbreak. This report only gathered partial (and for some growers incomplete, as they didn't have the figures at hand) information about the industry. The report only contacted 19 growers even though we now know the industry involves over 80. This was a totally inadequate useless report, that despite numerous requests has not been released to the participants.
- When the 2016 outbreak was first reported to BT, the BT First Response Team found that the property had no biosecurity measures in place. This despite the fact that they brought their own workers from an area known to be infected with Blueberry Rust into Tasmania. The First Response Team put Costas, Sulphur Creek under containment but we are aware that despite Costas being requested to provide on site washing facilities they were allowed to send personnel home in their work clothes and just provide them with washing powder to decontaminate their clothes. This is not containing an outbreak they may never wash their clothes or may stop on the way home transporting the rust with them.

## 2. Past and Present regulatory requirements relating to the blueberry industry in Tasmania;

- Plant inspection of ALL plant material before it leaves the mainland. The 2014 outbreak was due to nursery plants imported with the disease and even after this Michael Ferris, farm

manager at Smart Berries, Forth, reports that plants transported to their nursery in 2016 were deported back to the mainland as they had Blueberry Rust.

3. The future of Tasmania's blueberry industry, including the impacts of previous, current and any future outbreaks of Blueberry Rust;
  - Eradication of Blueberry Rust is the only way that the Tasmania's blueberry industry has a future.
  - Aviemore has already spent \$300,000.00 as part of a \$700,000.00 expansion program. This program has been put on hold awaiting the eradication of Blueberry Rust to still be viable. This program would have created at least 4 full time jobs and another 4 full time equivalent positions.
  - Farming is a stressful occupation. The 2014 outbreak nearly cost Chris May his life. The stresses from dealing with it have made him a gravely ill man. Since the 2016 outbreak at least 1 other commercial organic grower we know has decided its too much and is leaving the industry.
  - Reports that, even sprayed, Blueberry Rust can reduce yields by between 30% and 50% will make us unviable and we will have to shut our operation down.
  - 10% loss of crop if spray programs to control rust are required, even if they are only required to gain market access to SA, WA and VIC. Our 30 year old orchard was not laid out with sprayer access in mind. Taking a spray unit down the rows of our orchard during the picking season will conservatively knock 10% of the fruit off the bushes as it goes past. Access to other states currently requires spraying at least every 2 weeks, about 7 sprays a season for us.
  - Financial failure for the Tasmania blueberry industry. Market restriction will lead to Farmers having to dump the 100's of tons of fruit they currently send into SA, WA and VIC on the NSW and TAS markets. Woolworths current promotion of punnets of blueberries for \$2.50 they say is due to a glut from NSW growers. Blueberry punnets at this time of year normally sell for \$5.00 to \$6.00 and even during Summer normally retail at \$4.00 per punnet. Almost no one can absorb that sort of loss of profit.
  - Tasmania's reputation as a 'Clean, Green' state that takes biosecurity seriously is under grave threat. Biosecurity's failure to implement its own eradication/containment procedures on a disease outbreak leaves Tasmania vulnerable to a number of mainland diseases across multiple horticultural industries. Each outbreak of a different disease nibbles away at Tassie's reputation.
  - Loss of Tasmania's reputation will lose us the 10% to 20% price premium we get and the preferred sales position we have. It will also put a major hole in the Tasmanian agri-tourism industry. People from every state that visit our farm gate tell us they can't wait for Tassie fruit to come on to the market as its always the one they reach for first.
  - Agri-tourism, a major source of income for Tasmania, will be impacted. A loss in belief of Tasmania being disease free (mainly disease free, peoples minds fill in the rest) and thus spray free (again mainly) will reduce the number of people coming to Tasmania to get the best stuff. They can get diseased/sprayed stuff at home.
  - Eradication of Blueberry Rust not only saves Tasmania from all of the above effects, it will positively enhance Tasmania's reputation as a 'Clean, Green' state and we're sure, measurably increase income to the state.
4. The capacity of Biosecurity Tasmania to manage Blueberry Rust outbreaks and other risks into the future;
  - This is gravely in doubt.
  - Failure to enforce its own eradication/containment protocols leaves Tasmania open to any big company introducing any disease they encounter. No enforcement of a protocol is the same as no protocol at all. No penalty/cost for a lack of basic biosecurity, eg disinfecting tools/clothing brought from a diseased area, leaves no incentive to care or act.

- Non-disclosure of the protocols supposedly applied to Costas, Sulphur Creek, leaves the rest of the industry stressed. Are the protocols so tight that we can't possibly meet them and an outbreak would break us? Are the protocols too loose so that they are not stopping anything at all and we are gravely at risk if anyone associates with them and then turns up at our farm?
- Failure to consider the whole industry instead of just 1 of the big players has led to poor direction from the DPIPWE Secretary. How can any industry expand or grow if it believes only 1 company will ever be considered.

5. Any other matters incidental thereto;

- The posting on the DPIPWE web site on 30-May in regards to Blueberry Rust that;  
*As this disease is now considered established in Tasmania, Blueberry rust will be de-regulated as a disease exotic to Tasmania in coming months. The industry will be informed of any changed conditions of trade.*

Who physically put this on the website?

As far as we have been able to ascertain only the DPIPWE Secretary can authorise such a post. Why did he make the decision to de-regulate the disease?

- Politics needs to be taken out of Biosecurity. The implementation of Biosecurity needs to be left to trained people with set protocols. Almost immediately after the 2016 outbreak Rebecca White (Labour) was onto the news media demanding that the biosecurity restrictions put on Costas be lifted. This shows that Costas was immediately applying pressure to politicians to avoid and circumvent Biosecurity Tasmania.
- The Minister for DPIPWE, Jeremy Rockliff's reply on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September to Rachel's email of the 31<sup>st</sup> of May failed to answer some of its questions including 'where the bees have gone after the pollination of Costas, Sulphur Creek'?