Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment

Supplementary Submission to the

Government Administration Committee 'B' Sub-Committee Inquiry into

Blueberry Rust

II December 2017

I. Further information as to why Biosecurity Officers didn't complete a property inspection at Deep Bay in the one day.

Biosecurity Tasmania's monitoring strategy for blueberry rust over the 2017-18 growing period is the Blueberry Rust Surveillance Protocol, Biosecurity Tasmania, Version 1, 23-08-2017 (Attachment 1). During this period monitoring for blueberry rust will occur on all 72 known commercial blueberry properties in Tasmania.

Three surveys will be conducted on each property. One will be conducted when the plants come into leaf and before fruit picking commences, one mid-season and one at the end of the season. Biosecurity Tasmania surveillance teams will observe strict hygiene requirements at blueberry surveillance sites as per the *Property Inspections Biosecurity Hygiene Standard Operating Procedure* (Attachment 2).

The survey program is a significant undertaking and extreme care is taken to ensure Biosecurity Tasmania staff do not inadvertently cross contaminate properties whilst conducting monitoring surveys.

Staff are required to follow strict hygiene measures for vehicles, clothing and footwear as outlined in the *Property Inspections Biosecurity Hygiene Standard Operating Procedure*. Full decontamination of staff and equipment must occur between each site that is inspected. Sites separated by roads, or dams, or are under different management regimes, are treated as separate sites and sampled separately to avoid contamination by staff.

Because the site referred to on Mrs. Jones property at Deep Bay was separated by a road, staff would have needed to undertake a full decontamination procedure before proceeding to the remainder of the site across the road. Given that the staff had begun their day at 7.30am on 8 November 2017, and the time it was going to take to decontaminate and complete the survey at the next site was unknown, the team leader made the decision to undertake the second survey the next day.

The team left Hobart at 7.40am the next day (9 November 2017) and completed the survey at 12.35pm. If they had continued surveying on the previous day, it may not have been physically possible for them to complete the survey in the one day.

Inspectors in full hygiene gear (plastic overalls, gloves, booties) are subject to high levels of fatigue, even under mild weather conditions and consequently morning inspections are preferred.

2. Has anyone ever been charged through the Plant Quarantine Act 1997?

No charges have been laid under the *Plant Quarantine Act 1997* (the Act) in relation to the occurrence of blueberry rust in Tasmania.

In the past twelve months, 3 Infringement Notices have been issued under the Act in relation to section 68(2) – failing to comply with conditions or restrictions relating to importation.

In 2015, an investigation led to the charging and conviction of an individual for failing to notify an inspector of the suspected presence of 'Myrtle Rust' (a List A disease, under section 13 of the Act).

Infringement notices are more commonly issued for non-compliance matters listed in the *Plant Quarantine Regulations 2017.*

3. A copy of the response received in relation to Biosecurity Tasmania's investigation into contaminated plants from Victoria

The Minister sought information from the Victorian Minister for Agriculture with respect to investigations into the Victorian supply nursery that was at the centre of the 2014 incursion of blueberry rust into Tasmania. A copy of the response from the Minister is included as Attachment 3.

4. To provide a detailed answer regarding the TFGA's submission, page 2, and last paragraph.

Part A -The issues the TFGA raises in relation to the Schwinds.

Content of Laboratory Reports

In emergency response situations it is not common practice for a formal diagnostic laboratory report that includes the level of detail noted by the TFGA, to be provided to landowners. Response times are critical in emergency management where often high volumes of samples need to be assessed rapidly. The key objective at this stage of the response is to analyse samples submitted by Biosecurity Tasmania Field Teams and to assess them as positive or negative, in order to inform the next response strategy.

The diagnostics to confirm blueberry rust from samples taken at the Schwind's property was undertaken by Biosecurity Tasmania's Senior Plant Pathologist by morphological verification under the microscope at the Plant Health Laboratory in Newtown, Hobart. The samples collected were positive for blueberry rust. Where there is little doubt about the identification of a pathogen, molecular diagnostics is not used, although in this case subsequent diagnosis by molecular means confirmed those samples as containing blueberry rust.

The TFGA's concerns regarding the level of information provided to the landowners is noted and the Department has acknowledged that this is an area where it could have done things better. Biosecurity Tasmania strives to engage effectively with the community and recognises that in incursion response situations effective communication with landowners is critical to achieving good response outcomes. Consideration is being given as to how information can be more effectively provided to landowners and not just in emergency response situations but also in terms of ongoing communications with all stakeholders.

Correspondence and issues noted by TFGA of May and August 2017

Regarding the questions relating to correspondence to the Minister from the TFGA in May and August 2017, many of these questions were answered in the Minister's response of 15 August 2017. In regards, the question concerning the interstate nursery from which infected plants came from in 2014, please

see Attachment 3 that demonstrates the Minister did make investigations into this matter with the Victorian Minister for Agriculture.

Proposed action against local and interstate suppliers

In the TFGA's letter to Minister Rockliff of 29 May 2017 (Attachment 4) they ask 'We would appreciate an indication of the proposed action to be taken against the local nursery and mainland suppliers.' The Minister's response in his letter of 15 August 2017 (Attachment 5) referred the TFGA to the Deputy Secretary, Mr Tim Baker.

In addition to comments Mr Baker made to the TFGA directly, a summary of current planned activities and what happened at the time in 2014-15 is provided below.

All interstate suppliers of plants are subject to quarantine measures both pre and post border. The Victorian Government has its own biosecurity regime as does the Tasmanian Government.

Page 14 of DPIPWE's submission to the Blueberry Rust Inquiry of 30 October 2017 outlines that all infected premises were linked, via the transfer of blueberry plants, back to the original Victorian nursery through tracing activities.

A Victorian nursery supplied blueberry plants to a local nursery, from which the Schwind's sourced infected blueberry plants. Incidentally this local nursery had surveillance conducted for blueberry rust on 29 September 2014 however no rust was observed at this time.

Biosecurity Tasmania staff attended the local nursery on 2 January 2015 (after a Biosecurity Tasmania staff member who was shopping there personally noticed suspect plants) and Issued a Direction Notice. Six blueberry plants were removed following the relevant quarantine procedure and subsequently confirmed for blueberry rust.

Impact on the Schwind Family

It is acknowledged that the eradication procedure at the Schwind's property had a significant impact on the family and that is deeply regrettable. At the time Biosecurity Tasmania staff in the field and senior managers within the Department did what they thought was appropriate and did so in a manner they believed was fair.

The Department acknowledged in its appearance before the Inquiry Hearing that there were some things it could have done better and communicating with landholders and stakeholders is where the Department is actively seeking to make improvements.

Part B - Minister Rockliff's article in the Mercury

In both 2014 and 2016 outbreaks, Biosecurity Tasmania commenced a plant biosecurity emergency response consistent with the Biosecurity Incident Management System developed by the then Australian Government's Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (now the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources).

Using this system, consideration of the chance that a disease may subsequently re-enter Tasmania certainly is a factor but only one of many factors that contributes to the final decision. If all factors are

supportive of a good chance of successful eradication and only one factor suggests otherwise, for example that a disease may re-enter, a course of action to eradicate would be highly likely to follow.

In the case of the 2016 blueberry rust incursion, there were several factors suggesting eradication was not likely to be successful. Not the least of which was the size and extent of occurrence as opposed to the 2014 incident.

Detailed descriptions of how the response decisions were made in 2014 and then in 2016 are contained in DPIPWE's submission to the Blueberry Rust Inquiry of 30 October 2017.

Extra Information for the Inquiry.

Attachment 6: Priorities for Australia's Biosecurity System

Attachment 6 is the Priorities for Australia's Biosecurity System; An independent review of the capacity of the national biosecurity system and its underpinning intergovernmental agreement. W Craik et al, Commonwealth of Australia 2017.

Dr Whittington in the Inquiry Hearing of the 13 November 2017 (pages 52-53 of the Hansard Transcript) mentions this review as being relevant to the Blueberry Rust Inquiry.

Attachment 7 - Growing Tasmanian Agriculture

Attachment 7 is Growing Tasmanian Agriculture; research, development and extension for 2050, White Paper, AgriGrowth Tasmania, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment, 2017.

Dr Whittington in the Inquiry Hearing of the 13 November 2017 (page 49 of the Hansard Transcript) notes that the Department does not contend to know everything about blueberry rust. He makes the point that the Department is investing in research and is encouraging the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture to develop an active research program in the soft fruit berry area. This White Paper sets the framework for this continued investment.

Specifically, several action Principles will be developed to prioritise and allocate the Tasmanian Government's investment in RD&E

- Action 1: Principles will be developed to prioritise and allocate the Tasmanian Government's investment in RD&E activities to ensure they lead to sustainable productivity improvements and sustainable growth for Tasmanian farmers and agribusinesses. The principles will be reviewed every five years.
- Action 2: A five-year RD&E Investment Strategy will be developed by December 2018 to determine the proportion of State Government investment across the four recognised areas of RD&E being: industry development and sustainable production; capacity building; innovation; and international linkages. Thereafter new investment strategies will be developed every five years.
- Action 3: Research project proposals and assessments will explicitly focus on the expected farm-level impacts of a proposed RD&E project and include extension and outreach activities.
- Action 4: A range of standard performance and impact metrics on the effectiveness of RD&E activities in supporting Tasmanian agriculture and food producers will be developed and subsequently reported on an annual basis. Specific metrics will be developed by June 2018 to guide and assess extension efforts.

- Action 5: An Agricultural Innovation Fund will be established to address emerging opportunities and issues, which will directly impact Tasmanian agriculture.
- Action 6: The State Government will work with TIA to increase the State's RD&E capacity in biosecurity risk mitigation, across all relevant sectors of Tasmanian agriculture to maintain and build our comparative advantage in relative pest and disease freedom and support the Tasmanian Brand