

State Biosecurity Forum 2014

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The idea of ‘shared responsibility’ has underpinned the delivery of biosecurity for many years. In 1996, it was cited as the foundation for a ‘fresh approach to Australian quarantine’; and, since that time, has been incorporated as a key principle of our biosecurity at national, state and local levels.

The theme of today’s forum — valuing our future, connecting people and managing pests and diseases —is what biosecurity is about.

[As Rob Delane mentioned], we have a responsibility toward future generations — and maintaining our biosecurity is an important part of this. Biosecurity is necessary to preserve and enhance our unique natural environment and biodiversity, to sustain our profitable food and other industry sectors, and to maintain the social amenity and levels of public health that we often take for granted.

But the world is changing. Maintaining our biosecurity is becoming increasingly complex owing to factors such as a changing climate, more travel and trade, population growth and spread, growing demands for food, and changing land use.

It is up to all of us — industry, government and community — to work together to strengthen our State's biosecurity system, and provide the greatest chance of maintaining our biosecurity for future generations.

Collaboration, cooperation, consultation, communication and contribution across all sectors is essential. To go back to the theme of today's forum — it is about 'connecting people'.

There are several dimensions to this.

At the broad level, we need to connect with the people – those living in WA as well as those visiting our State – to increase the general awareness and understanding of biosecurity. This was identified as a top need of industry, government and community stakeholders through some work undertaken by the Biosecurity Council earlier this year.

A general understanding and awareness of biosecurity and its environmental, economic and social importance is seen as providing the necessary grounding for increased citizen engagement and participation in biosecurity-related activities. This could be as simple as disposing of risk material when arriving at our airports, to participating in local groups to control feral animals and invasive plants.

In short, there was a strong belief that citizens were an underutilised, but often willing, resource.

But not only do we need to connect with the people; they also need to be able to connect with us and have the confidence that their efforts are really making a difference.

At a more strategic level, collaboration, cooperation, consultation, communication and contribution becomes critical.

Biosecurity is a cross-border endeavour. It is not bound at the property, region or even state level. Nor is it confined to a specific industry or government agency. Maintaining our biosecurity requires partnerships – connecting people and resources across and between government agencies, industries and communities — partnerships to develop the strategic direction; partnerships to identify the priority areas in which to target resources; partnerships to undertake research; partnerships to deliver on-ground biosecurity activities.

‘Connecting people’ and working together forms the crux of a coordinated biosecurity system, but clear and agreed roles and responsibilities will facilitate this and provide a more effective way forward to manage pests and diseases.

The work undertaken by the Biosecurity Council earlier this year built a compelling picture of stakeholder perceptions of the delivery of biosecurity activity in Western Australia, and how industry, government and communities fit within this system.

From this work, which captured the views of more than 300 stakeholders from across industry, government and community, several areas emerged as key to maintaining or improving the biosecurity of our State. And underpinning them all was the principle of biosecurity as a shared responsibility.

The first area is the need for broad engagement, education and awareness-raising to develop and maintain widespread support for the State’s biosecurity system. I have mentioned this earlier, but I’d like to reiterate that this ‘citizen engagement’ was identified as a top need through our work.

Secondly, we need to collaborate, cooperate and communicate with key organisations or individuals with a strong stake in the issue to ensure support, understanding and ownership.

Another key area is the provision of robust legislation, and its enforcement to ensure the integrity of the system is maintained.

Maintaining an adequate level of preparedness was also recognised. There were two aspects to this – firstly, keeping abreast of national and international biosecurity threats that may impact on our State; and secondly, ensuring adequate capacity, resources and processes for response and recovery to biosecurity incursions.

Another imperative was research, innovation and continuous improvement to enable a flexible biosecurity system that can adjust to changing circumstances.

A significant issue in managing pests and diseases that emerged through our work was the targeting of government, industry and community investment toward the priority areas. Of course, this requires us to actually know what the priority areas are.

From our work, stakeholder collaboration in identifying the priorities was seen as critical. Any prioritisation process must be clear, and underpinned by science and risk management principles.

With declining resources and increasing biosecurity risk, targeting where investments are made is essential, and it is important that the process facilitates stakeholder acceptance of the subsequent investment decisions.

It is probably no surprise that adequate government resourcing for biosecurity activity was identified as the number one need for maintaining or improving Western Australia's biosecurity.

The decline in government resources has reinforced the need for government to target their investment toward priority areas. A fundamental consideration for government will always be the need to ensure the effective investment of public funds. As government budgets become more stretched, identifying the top priorities to target with public funds becomes imperative.

There is also an increased need for collaborative partnerships between government, industry and community to ensure the key components of the State's biosecurity system are preserved.

By valuing our future, connecting people and managing pests and diseases we can improve our biosecurity. But biosecurity is a shared responsibility — industry, government and community working in concert will strengthen our biosecurity system, and provide the greatest chance of maintaining our biosecurity for future generations.