Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Tree Health and Plant Biosecurity Expert Taskforce: Stakeholder Engagement Report

May 2013

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Introduction

The Taskforce invited key stakeholders to comment, both in writing and in person at a meeting held on 21st March 2013, on the recommendations set out in the interim report[1,2]. These stakeholders included representatives of the Woodland Trust, Country Land and Business Association, Duchy of Cornwall, Royal Horticultural Society, English Heritage, Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, Horticultural Trades Association, Tree Council, British Potato Trade Association, National Farmers Union, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, SRUC (Scotland's Rural College), members of the Plant Health Advisory Forum, and the National Trust for Scotland. Representatives of the Welsh and Scottish Governments were also in attendance.

Summary

The stakeholders all welcomed the opportunity to comment on the draft report and acknowledged they all had a role in helping maintain and improve the health status of plants and trees. Overall, they were very supportive of all the recommendations and provided useful suggestions for how they could best be implemented in practice. Detailed comments on each recommendation are provided below. The stakeholders also stressed that the recommendations are all interdependent and should be treated as a package.

The stakeholders appreciated the speed with which the report had been produced and expressed the hope that government would respond equally quickly.

Finally, the stakeholders recognised the current constraints on public funding and expressed concern that the biggest value of trees is to society in the provision of ecosystem services. There is a market failure in this sector so the industry cannot be expected to help itself completely.

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[1] Note that the recommendations are presented here in the order they were presented in the interim report which differs to that of the final report. However, the issues described in each recommendation did not change between the interim and final reports.

[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tree-health-and-plant-biosecurity-expert-taskforce-interim-report

Recommendation 1: Develop a prioritised risk register for tree health and plant biosecurity

The stakeholders supported the need for a risk register and recognised that it could be a step forward in improving co-ordination in plant biosecurity.

However, they emphasised that it would be essential to keep the register up-to-date to ensure prompt action can be taken when a new pest or disease emerges. The register should cover diseases already present and causing damage in the UK, and should take account of new strains of endemic diseases which arise as a result of evolutionary or environmental change or the re-emergence of existing diseases as a result of pesticide resistance or withdrawal of pesticides. The stakeholders felt that a lot of the necessary information already existed, but that there was a need to pull it all together into a single register and they suggested various elements that should be considered when designing the risk register:

- it is important to consider whole pathways, and the impact of changes anywhere along these pathways (for example, the withdrawal of methyl bromide reduced options for making consignments safe through fumigation);

- trade pathways need to be understood and articulated in the register. Wooden pallets and wood packaging material from outside the EU can be a particular source of contamination – it's not just about plants;

- cost-benefit analysis of the impact of particular pests or diseases should include social and environmental costs, particularly as loss of trees is often not primarily an economic issue. An ecosystems approach would be useful;

- risk appetite is very important, and the register needs to articulate the level of risk that might be acceptable;

- information on "threshold levels" which trigger decisions on when to take action should be included; and

- the register will need to reflect that there are different levels of knowledge about pests and diseases by showing the degree of uncertainty around the information. It also needs to make it clear what to do with information when a new pest or disease is identified.

The register could be used to prioritise resources, thus ensuring that people can be allocated effectively to deal with outbreaks on a case-by-case basis. It will also inform discussions around disease threats (current and potential), providing a platform which means that all stakeholders have the same understanding of the situation.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen biosecurity to reduce risks at the border and within the UK

The stakeholders supported this recommendation but stressed that any changes would need to be proportionate and enforced effectively. Plant Passports could work at a trade level but would not be practicable for consumers. There was scepticism that consumers would pay more for plants labelled as healthy, especially as all plants should already be healthy at point of sale. The system would need to avoid putting excessive burdens on business, but would need to be monitored to ensure it was effective.

The stakeholders recognised this recommendation was partly about education. There is a need to change peoples' perceptions of the risks associated with importing plants. The proposal that travellers should not be allowed to bring in any plant material from outside EU was attractive and avoided the need for border staff to be able to identify specific plants, pests or diseases. Such an approach is more likely to change the culture than to have a major impact on disease imports but could help emphasise the risks. As well as educating the public, there is a need to up-skill forest nursery staff so they know how to minimise potential problems.

The stakeholders recognised there is a significant export market and that it would be wrong to stop this. The system should work to ensure that trade in both directions is safe.

A Plant Passport system would enable greater confidence not only in the provenance of plants and seeds but also in the country in which the plants and seeds were grown. In addition, if at some future point companies choose to import different varieties of native trees from different parts of Europe (as part of an adaptation response to climate change or to improve the genetic diversity in UK) they need to be able to do so with confidence. It is essential that Plant Passports are underpinned by effective processes to ensure they are more useful than current provenance certificates.

Currently Plant Passports apply to a very limited set of plant material and there would be value in extending it to all plants for planting as indicated in draft Commission proposals for a revised EU regime. Plants could then be assessed against all the pests and diseases that would appear on any new risk register, with the UK seeking protected zone status based on the risk register, before a pest or pathogen arrives in the UK.

Finally, if this is an opportunity to reinvigorate home-grown trade, it is important to consider how much of a burden Plant Passports will be for very small businesses. There are EU proposals to provide exemptions for very small businesses and the Commission is set to define what a small business is, so the stakeholders suggested it would be important for the industry to help develop this definition.

Recommendation 3: Appoint a Chief Plant Health Officer to own the UK risk register and provide strategic and tactical leadership for managing those risks

All stakeholders strongly endorsed this recommendation. They felt that it would be particularly useful to have an individual with overall responsibility, who could lead on behalf of the Devolved Administrations. The Chief Plant Health Officer should have oversight of all plants, not just trees. However, they felt it would not be sufficient to just appoint a single individual and that they needed to have access to sufficient staff and budgetary resources to make it work. Finally, the industry would value having a single point of contact. Industry would greatly value someone who can demonstrate to government why they might need to intervene to deal with a pest or disease outbreak.

Recommendation 4: Review, simplify and strengthen governance and legislation

The stakeholders supported this recommendation. The current landscape can be complicated with a wide range of groups with which organisations can engage, making it hard sometimes to decide where to focus efforts. For example, for those working specifically on Chalara, there have recently been lots of different groups (for example, UK Plant Health Strategic Advisory Forum, UK Plant Health Strategy Board, Chalara Stakeholder Group, Chalara Outbreak Management Group, Biosecurity Programme Board, etc.) and it can be difficult for smaller organisations to participate in all of them. A better and clearer structure would be good to enable a proper partnership approach.

Clarity on the different roles of all players (Defra, Devolved Administrations, Forestry Commission, Fera, various committees, etc.) would help. However, there is a risk in having to work across UK borders, as forestry and plant health are devolved issues, and effective disease control could be hampered if there are not good protocols to ensure cross-border co-operation and action. There are good examples of cross-border co-operation (for example, in dealing with agricultural diseases) and these should be built upon. This recommendation links to recommendation 1 as it will be easier to enable effective co-ordination with a well-articulated risk register.

Recommendation 5: Maximise the use of epidemiological intelligence from EU/other regions and work to improve the EU regulations concerned with tree and plant biosecurity

The stakeholders supported this recommendation. However, they felt there would be value in using intelligence beyond epidemiological intelligence and suggested sharing the outputs from different European networks, or helping to translate documents written in languages other than English. The intelligence obtained could feed into the risk register. Where possible, the UK should look to Europe to gain information (for example, in breeding resistant ash trees).

The stakeholders offered their support in work to improve the EU regulations. For example, if the Taskforce could indicate one or two practical solutions that could help improve plant health, the stakeholder group were willing to use their links with European organisations to lobby for changes. The Taskforce welcomed this offer.

Recommendation 6: Develop and implement procedures for preparedness and contingency planning to predict, monitor and control the spread of disease

The stakeholders supported this recommendation. However, they suggested it would be helpful to include a strategy for existing endemic diseases and that it would be important to ensure that epidemiological science was at the heart of the decision making procedure to help decide on the appropriate action.   That said, it should be recognised that capacity could be an issue rather than details of the contingency plans. Response to specific outbreaks is relatively efficient, but the risk is that when these occur simultaneously, the agencies involved will be unable to act effectively. More resources are needed to deal with outbreak management.   A pool of trained and available contractors and surveyors, including volunteers, would enable a more flexible response.

Recommendation 7: Develop a modern user-friendly, expert system to provide quick and intelligent access to data about tree health and plant biosecurity

The stakeholders supported this recommendation. They saw a particular need to make it easy to report the emergence of new pests and diseases into a central system. When a new problem emerges, it can be difficult to decide who to tell, and even once an organisation has been informed, does it have the infrastructure to use this information? Clearly, this recommendation links to the role of the Chief Plant Health Officer.

The stakeholders recognised that citizen science can play a part in early warning systems, but that such information needs to be used with caution as there can be issues with the quality of the information. Nonetheless, a mechanism where foresters, landowners, and members of public can flag up potential problems could provide years of forewarning.

Recommendation 8: Identify and address key skills shortages

The stakeholders endorsed this recommendation and suggested it could be strengthened, perhaps by removing the need to "identify" in the title, since they felt that the Taskforce have already identified many of the missing skills. A recommendation to "address key skills shortages" was more powerful, and would speed up progress that might otherwise be hampered by a lengthy process to identify the skills.

It was felt that the industry would comment if any skills are missing and that there would be value in considering future skills gaps. There are roles for many groups here: if the industry is able to support jobs in key areas, then universities will start offering degree courses. There is also a need to involve the Research Councils so they start to develop research programmes that will provide opportunities for scientists to develop the right skills.

This document/publication is also available on our website at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/policy-advisory-groups/tree-health-and-plant-biosecurity-expert-taskforce

Any enquiries regarding this document/publication should be sent to us at:

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