



Animal &
Plant Health
Agency

Animal and Plant Health Agency
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www.gov.uk/apha

Our Ref: ATIC2334

[REDACTED]
{By Email}

03 March 2021

Dear [REDACTED]

PROVISION OF REQUESTED INFORMATION

Thank you for your request for information about seed packets, which we received on 02 February 2021. Your request has been handled under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

The information you requested and our response is detailed below:

"I write under the Freedom of Information act to request information relating to an investigation carried out by APHA last August, into seed packages sent unsolicited to Brits. Most of these packages appeared at the time to have come from China and were often marked as earrings, beads or other non-plant items.

Specifically, I would like to know:

"1.How many reports APHA received of such packages?"

APHA have received in the region of 3000 queries which we can attribute to unsolicited seed.

"2.How many of these were collected by APHA for sampling and testing?"

When APHA received a query we requested the enquirer to send the seed to APHA – approximately 1800 packages received which had between 1 – 10 packets of seed.

"3.Whether an investigation was carried out? If so, please provide a copy of any investigation documents."

We are conducting both scientific work (physical and molecular identification of the seed received) and also a documentary investigation based on the information received from

external stakeholders (private individuals, companies, etc) to determine which online sites and suppliers can be linked to the unsolicited seed.

As this investigation is continuing and pending publication, it is exempt from release under Section 22a of the FOIA. The use of this exemption is subject to a Public Interest Test. Please see below for further information.

“4. Whether any advice (eg, on customs and security) was issued as a result of the case? If so, I would like a copy of any guidance or advice produced.”

Ongoing work with customs who are working alongside APHA at various UK points of entry to identify mail/packages that may contain unsolicited seed.

The public through various means have been asked not to plant any unsolicited seeds they have received, but to destroy them, or send them into APHA for destruction and further investigation. Please see advice here:

<https://planthealthportal.defra.gov.uk/latest-news/unsolicited-seed-parcels/>

Section 22a – Public Interest Test

APHA recognise that there is a strong interest around unsolicited seed parcels. However, we have concluded that the public interest in withholding the information sought outweighs the public interest in its disclosure. Releasing information now before it has been finalised would be misleading to the public on an already complex and sensitive issue and this would contradict the principles behind Freedom of Information. It is in the public interest to wait until the information has been collected and assessed rather than to release the information in a piecemeal fashion.

Given the importance of publishing only appropriately collated and checked information, it is reasonable to expect that this information should be published in line with accepted practice rather than disclosed before official publication.

Information disclosed in response to this FOI request is releasable to the public. In keeping with the spirit and effect of the FOI and the government's Transparency Agenda, this letter and the information disclosed to you may be placed on GOV.UK, together with any related information that will provide a key to its wider context. No information identifying you will be placed on the GOV.UK website.

An Annex is attached which explains the copyright that applies to the information being released to you and contact details should you be unhappy with the service you have received.

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact the Access to Information Team at the email address below. During the current Coronavirus outbreak, our offices will be closed.

Yours sincerely

ACCESS TO INFORMATION TEAM

Email: enquiries@apha.gov.uk

Annex

Copyright

The information supplied to you continues to be protected by copyright. You are free to use it for your own purposes, including for private study and non-commercial research, and for any other purpose authorised by an exception in current copyright law. Documents (except photographs or logos) can also be used in the UK without requiring permission for the purposes of news reporting. Any other re-use, for example commercial publication, would require the permission of the copyright holder.

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Complaints

If you are unhappy with the service you have received in relation to your request, you may make a complaint or appeal against our decision under section 17(7) of the FOIA or under regulation 11 of the EIRs, as applicable, within 40 working days of the date of this letter. Please write to the Access to Information Manager at the address at the top of this letter or email enquiries@apha.gov.uk and the team will arrange for an internal review of your case.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, section 50 of the FOIA and regulation 18 of the EIRs gives you the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) for a decision. Please note that generally the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have first exhausted APHA's own complaints procedure. The ICO can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

Coronavirus

If you need to contact the ICO during the coronavirus pandemic, it's best to do so online. Please click [here](#) for contact details. You can also call them on 0303 123 1113.