



Date: 26/09/2024

Update on Tomato Brown Rugose Fruit Virus (ToBRFV) Outbreak and National Biosecurity Response

Dear Members of **Protected Cropping Australia (PCA)** and the Broader Fresh Produce & Agricultural Industry,

Following a call from a concerned CEA grower yesterday evening, I am writing to provide an extensive update on the Tomato Brown Rugose Fruit Virus (ToBRFV) outbreak and the efforts being undertaken across Australia to combat this threat. The situation is critical for the Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA) sector.

This communication highlights the importance of our involvement in the **Consultative Committee on Emergency Plant Pests (CCEPP)** and consolidates the various actions, meetings, advocacy, and correspondence that have occurred over the last few months. Despite a lack of visibility in some biosecurity measures, PCA has been at the forefront of efforts, advocating strongly for the interests of growers while coordinating with national and state bodies. This letter includes the roles played by various stakeholders and government entities in shaping biosecurity responses and outlines PCA's next steps in addressing this challenge and ongoing reassurance of a coordinated approach.

National Coordination and Initial Joint Response

August 2024: Initial PCA Joint Response Meeting

On **30 August 2024**, PCA convened a critical joint response meeting to address the ToBRFV outbreak. This meeting brought together key stakeholders from across the agriculture sector, including government biosecurity officials, growers, and industry representatives. The aim was to develop a unified national strategy for virus containment, economic impact minimisation, and information sharing across the sector.

The attendees of this meeting included:

- Representatives from **Protected Cropping Australia (PCA)**
- A representative of Hydroponic Farmers Federation (HFF)
- **Agriculture Victoria**
- **Plant Health Australia**
- **AUSVEG**
- **State Biosecurity Departments**
- Industry growers/Farmers and representatives representing greater than 50% of Australia's Glasshouse Tomato Production

The discussions were vital in establishing the foundation for a coordinated national response. Various state biosecurity bodies provided updates on the status of the virus, the measures in place, and next steps required to prevent further spread.

Summary of Discussions

1. Current Situation and Status Updates

Representatives from state biosecurity agencies provided updates, emphasising the strict quarantine and containment efforts in **South Australia, Queensland, and Western Australia.**

2. Concerns Raised by Growers

Growers expressed concerns about the potential impact of containment measures, such as crop destruction. It was suggested that international case studies, particularly from Europe, be reviewed to inform best practices and avoid unnecessary economic damage.

3. Action Items and Next Steps

- **Review of European Case Studies:** The group agreed to explore responses from Europe to guide Australia's biosecurity efforts.
- **Communication Strategy:** The importance of maintaining communication with growers about biosecurity protocols was emphasised.
- **Information Distribution:** PCA committed to distributing accurate biosecurity information, with roadshows proposed to educate growers.

Key Issues Raised

• Market Access and Trade Restrictions

Concerns were raised about state-imposed trade restrictions and their impact on growers' market access. There was a clear need for a strategy to manage trade restrictions while ensuring growers remain operational.

• Eradication vs. Long-Term Management

The debate continues on whether complete eradication of ToBRFV is feasible or if long-term management is more realistic. Further expert consultation is needed to assess both approaches.

Immediate Outcomes of the Meeting

Several outcomes emerged from this meeting:

Collaboration and Information Sharing: Attendees committed to maintaining open communication channels across national and state bodies, ensuring regular updates.

- **Leverage International Best Practices:** European practices that successfully managed ToBRFV outbreaks were to be integrated into Australia's biosecurity strategy.
- **Central Communication Hub:** PCA was to act as a central hub for communication, ensuring that growers were regularly updated on biosecurity measures.

State-Specific Responses and National Biosecurity Measures

South Australia (SA):

In **August 2024**, ToBRFV was detected in the **Northern Adelaide Plains**. The **Department of Primary Industries and Regions South Australia (PIRSA)** swiftly quarantined the affected areas, increased testing, and enforced strict biosecurity measures. These proactive efforts have been essential in limiting the virus's impact.

Queensland (QLD):

On **24 August 2024**, Queensland imposed a **movement control order** restricting the movement of tomatoes, seeds, and seedlings from South Australia to Queensland to protect its agricultural industry.

Western Australia (WA):

Following Queensland's actions, Western Australia implemented similar restrictions on high-risk plant materials and introduced strict quarantine protocols to prevent the virus from entering the state.

New South Wales (NSW):

By **mid-September**, NSW introduced a **control order** restricting the movement of potentially infected plant materials into the state to protect its agricultural sector.

Victoria (VIC):

Although no confirmed cases of ToBRFV have been reported in Victoria, **Agriculture Victoria** has implemented enhanced surveillance and biosecurity measures. The **Biosecurity Reference Group** continues to monitor the situation closely, ensuring the state remains prepared in the event of an outbreak.

National Taskforce (SA Expansion):

In **late September 2024**, PIRSA expanded quarantine measures to include a large commercial operation after an increase in virus prevalence. A **national taskforce**,

including representatives from **AUSVEG SA**, continues to oversee eradication efforts and provide support for workers affected by the outbreak.

PCA's National Advocacy and Key Contributions

Throughout the outbreak, PCA has remained a strong advocate for CEA growers, ensuring their concerns are heard at both state and national levels. PCA's contributions have been pivotal in driving biosecurity discussions and ensuring that growers' needs are represented.

August 2024: Initial Advocacy

In **early August**, PCA contacted national and state biosecurity authorities to emphasise the need for robust biosecurity measures tailored to CEA growers. PCA successfully advocated for the inclusion of the sector in key discussions, ensuring growers' concerns were heard.

August 22, 2024: Application to Plant Health Australia (PHA)

On **22 August**, PCA formally applied for membership in **Plant Health Australia (PHA)** to ensure direct involvement in national biosecurity decisions. This membership allows PCA to represent the CEA sector in shaping national biosecurity policy.

September 4, 2024: Application to the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed (EPPRD)

On **4 September**, PCA applied to become a signatory to the **Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed (EPPRD)**. This deed formalises PCA's commitment to supporting national biosecurity responses and ensures the sector remains engaged in responding to plant pest outbreaks.

PCA's Strategic Biosecurity Involvement and Market Access Proposal

PCA submitted a **Strategic Biosecurity Involvement and Market Access Proposal** to the Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry on **23 September 2024**. The proposal included the following key initiatives:

- 1. Observer Status for Biosecurity Discussions:**

PCA requested **formal observer status** in national biosecurity discussions to ensure that the specific concerns of the CEA sector are fully represented. This observer role is crucial, allowing PCA to contribute to the decision-making

process on biosecurity policies that directly impact protected cropping growers. Without observer status, key decisions may be made without considering the needs of CEA growers, potentially leading to measures that negatively impact the industry.

2. **Expedited Inclusion in EPPRD:**

PCA urged for **expedited inclusion** in the **Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed (EPPRD)**. Currently, CEA growers are not covered by the EPPRD as it pertains to Tomatoes, which has limited their access to information and emergency biosecurity funding in the event of an outbreak like ToBRFV. PCA's inclusion would enable swift mobilisation of resources, allowing growers to receive proper guidance and assistance to manage the impacts of the virus and prevent its spread whilst obvious gaps in representation are addressed.

3. **Sector-Specific Biosecurity Levy:**

The proposal advocated for the creation of a **sector-specific biosecurity levy** that would generate funds for rapid responses to future biosecurity threats. The levy would be designed specifically for the protected cropping sector, ensuring that growers have the financial support necessary to mitigate outbreaks such as ToBRFV. This would reduce reliance on external funding sources and empower the sector to take immediate action when needed.

4. **Public-Private Insurance Models:**

PCA also proposed exploring **public-private insurance partnerships** that would provide financial protection for growers impacted by biosecurity incursions. These insurance models would offer a safety net, enabling growers to recover quickly from the economic losses caused by outbreaks. The insurance would cover losses associated with quarantine measures, crop destruction, and market access restrictions, helping growers remain viable during challenging times.

5. **National Market Access Coordination:**

The proposal highlighted the need for a **national, science-based approach** to managing market access during biosecurity incidents. PCA urged the government to ensure that market access restrictions are based on scientific evidence and implemented in a coordinated manner across states. This approach would prevent unnecessary disruptions to trade and allow growers to continue operating while maintaining strict biosecurity standards.

Unfortunately, no formal response has been received from the Ministers office, which is concerning given the ongoing risks and pressures on growers due to ToBRFV.

Key Organisations Involved in PCA's Advocacy and Communications

Throughout the ToBRFV outbreak, several key organisations have been actively involved in communicating with PCA and Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA) growers, shaping biosecurity responses, and facilitating key decisions. Below is a summary of the roles these organisations have played, their contributions to biosecurity efforts, and their involvement with PCA:

1. Protected Cropping Australia (PCA) Leadership

PCA, through its leadership, has been at the forefront of advocacy efforts on behalf of CEA growers. The organisation has ensured that the sector's concerns are represented at both state and national levels. PCA's leadership team has maintained continuous communication with stakeholders, government officials, and industry leaders to advance biosecurity measures that safeguard the interests of growers.

2. AUSVEG Biosecurity and Extension Team

The Biosecurity and Extension division of AUSVEG has been a key ally in PCA's efforts to secure observer status on the Consultative Committee on Emergency Plant Pests (CCEPP). AUSVEG's support has been instrumental in facilitating PCA's future participation in key biosecurity meetings, ensuring that the protected cropping sector is included in national decision-making processes.

3. South Australia Department of Primary Industries and Regions (PIRSA)

PIRSA has overseen South Australia's response to ToBRFV, particularly in the Northern Adelaide Plains. PIRSA has regularly communicated with PCA to address concerns regarding interstate trade restrictions and the economic impacts of biosecurity measures on growers. PIRSA's leadership has been vital in South Australia's quarantine and containment efforts.

4. PCA/HFF Members – Grower Representatives

Representatives from the protected cropping sector, including large-scale growers, have been active in advocating for more balanced biosecurity responses. These representatives have played an important role in voicing concerns about the potential impact of crop eradication measures and in shaping PCA's biosecurity proposals to ensure the long-term sustainability of growers.

5. Plant Health Australia (PHA)

Plant Health Australia has been a critical player in supporting PCA's application for membership and inclusion in national biosecurity frameworks. PHA has worked closely with PCA to ensure that the CEA sector is represented in biosecurity discussions and that growers have a voice in decision-making processes related to plant pest management.

6. **Biosecurity Reference Group, Victoria**

The Victorian Biosecurity Reference Group has coordinated the state's biosecurity response to ToBRFV, ensuring that it remains free from confirmed cases. The group's efforts in enhancing surveillance and biosecurity measures have been essential in preparing Victoria for any potential outbreaks and in maintaining the state's biosecurity readiness.

7. **PIRSA Coordination Team**

The coordination team at PIRSA has been instrumental in facilitating responses to the ToBRFV outbreak. Their involvement has helped facilitate discussions between PCA and state biosecurity authorities, particularly regarding the implementation of trade restrictions and containment measures.

8. **Agriculture Victoria**

Agriculture Victoria has been closely involved in coordinating the state's biosecurity efforts and has worked collaboratively with PCA to ensure that biosecurity protocols are effectively communicated to growers. Their proactive approach has played a vital role in maintaining a robust biosecurity environment in Victoria.

These organisations have been central to shaping Australia's response to ToBRFV, and PCA continues to work closely with them to ensure the CEA sector is well-represented at the CCEP in ongoing biosecurity discussions.

What is the CCEPP and Why is it Important?

The **Consultative Committee on Emergency Plant Pests (CCEPP)** is a national body responsible for coordinating responses to significant plant pest outbreaks, such as ToBRFV. It includes representatives from government, industry, and biosecurity experts who collaborate to formulate containment strategies and preventive measures. PCA's role as an observer ensures that the protected cropping sector's concerns are taken into account in the decision-making process, ultimately allowing for more practical and effective biosecurity measures for growers.

Conclusion and Immediate Actions

PCA continues to advocate for immediate government action on the following:

1. **Grant PCA Formal Observer Status**

It is imperative that PCA is granted formal **observer status** in national biosecurity discussions. This will allow the sector to provide timely feedback and ensure that policies reflect the needs of protected cropping growers.

2. **Fast-Track PCA's Inclusion in the EPPRD**

PCA's inclusion in the **Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed (EPPRD)** must be

expedited to provide growers with structured access to critical biosecurity information during outbreaks. This would ensure that resources can be mobilised swiftly in response to future threats.

3. **Establish a Sector-Specific Biosecurity Levy**

A **biosecurity levy** for the protected cropping sector should be implemented to ensure rapid access to funds during biosecurity emergencies, empowering the sector to take proactive steps to prevent the spread of pests and diseases.

4. **Develop Public-Private Insurance Models**

The government should explore **public-private insurance models** to financially safeguard growers from the economic impacts of biosecurity incidents. These models would provide a critical safety net for growers affected by outbreaks like ToBRFV.

5. **Coordinate National Market Access Efforts**

PCA urges the government to adopt a **science-based approach** to market access restrictions during biosecurity outbreaks. This will ensure that trade can continue safely without imposing unnecessary economic burdens on growers.

Practical Steps for Growers Nationwide

PCA advises all growers to adopt the following biosecurity measures to protect against ToBRFV:

- **Regularly inspect crops** for symptoms such as mosaic patterns, leaf deformation, and uneven ripening.
- **Maintain strict sanitation protocols**, ensuring tools and equipment are disinfected after each use.
- **Source seeds from certified virus-free suppliers** and test new seed batches before planting.
- **Report any suspicious symptoms immediately** to the Exotic Plant Pest Hotline (1800 084 881) or PIRSA's hotline (1800 931 314).

By following these steps, we can collectively protect crops and ensure the continued viability of Australia's protected cropping sector.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Tout', written in a cursive style.

Andrew Tout

Chair

Protected Cropping Australia