

Highgrove Plant Health Conference

Speech from HTA Director of
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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak today and bring everyone up to speed on what the industry has been doing to shoulder its responsibilities for UK biosecurity. We all know, or at least in this audience we all should know that woody plant material and wood packaging materials are amongst the highest risk pathways for pest and disease movement. And we have known this for a while, since Dutch Elm disease, Phytophthora ramorum and ash dieback. This risk mushroomed in late 2015 with the emergence of a cold-hardy strain of Xylella fastidiosa, and unfortunately this disease strain threatens to put you out of business. For the first time it also threatens all professional plant operations – retailer, landscaper, designer, grower, tree surgeon – the emergency measures spare no-one in the supply chain.

At the HTA and APHA Biosecurity conference of February 2016 we decided to up our game. There were two key starting points. Firstly, to develop some kind of scheme that would improve standard of plant health management at nursery level. And secondly, we needed a clearer picture of why we import hundreds of millions of pounds' worth of woody plant material every year.

This second objective was far more straightforward and we published this report last year. It is only the publication which was the straightforward bit of course, because the real work of actually addressing the issues in here requires joined-up action between Government, public bodies and industry.

And as we know from our recent experience of large public procurement projects and the failing woodland creation grants system, this is a massive challenge requiring cross-government working and landscape awareness.

The first objective, to create a management system – what is now called the Plant Health Assurance Scheme – was initiated by the team at Boningale Nurseries, who adapted their existing ISO 9001 quality management system to focus on biosecurity. The genius of their system was to share the responsibilities across the business, giving key people key accountabilities such as pest and disease identification and the justification for foreign buying decisions. This ensures buy-in from the business rather than one individual. It also reaches to the top of the company by making Directors responsible for drafting and signing off a Plant Health Policy for the business.

So far so good, but how do we build a scheme that works for everyone, thereby raising standards and managing the risks in today's global plant trade? With the buy-in from many of our leading growers and Government seed money, we carried out a pilot project last year, testing the theory with nurseries of all shapes and sizes. We learned a lot from this process, especially the varying levels of documented plant health management out there in the real world. Some nurseries had quite impressive audit trails and records of their biosecurity measures in place. Others had very little written down. This didn't mean that they were not taking their biosecurity responsibilities seriously, but more likely that it was all in people's heads.



We drafted the first Plant Health Standard from these exploratory visits. This standard consists of non-prescriptive statements of best practice concerning Management, Plant Health Controls, Recognition and Training, and Site housekeeping. These can be audited and the audit will be pass/fail with recommendations for improvement. Constant improvement is the bedrock of the scheme, and some of the pilot nurseries have already improved their management as a result.

Biosecurity training and guidance is one of the main gaps to be filled. There isn't much around currently, especially in the critical areas of managing risks. How does a plant buyer evaluate the risk of trading with a new partner in a different country? Risk management was never deemed important in traditional horticulture training. It is now.

The aim is to create a badged scheme which all plant buyers can specify, giving them confidence that the nurseries practice quality biosecurity management. The scheme is no silver bullet, however. We can never assure plants will be pest and disease free. And let's not kid ourselves that improving biosecurity is an end in itself here. We're talking about UK grower businesses which exist in a market which can be fickle and unpredictable. Labour worries, concerns about water supply, the ever-decreasing size of new-build gardens are constantly on their minds, and now Xylella and biosecurity is fast heading to the top of that list.

UK ornamental horticulture has never received a penny in subsidies and yet when there is a disease outbreak, growers have to foot the entire bill for destroyed stock. We saw this with ash dieback, even though the industry warned the Government before it came to the UK, explicitly asking for import bans on ash trees. This request went unheeded and some of the growers in this room lost hundreds of thousands of pounds as a result of the movement ban.

So introducing this shiny new scheme is not going to be easy, with its likely joining fee, expensive audit, and extra staff time commitment. Nursery businesses will need incentives to join the scheme. And again I wish to give credit to Nicola Spence, the plant health team and Defra on this, because they have been proactive in starting these discussions between their economists and the industry.

We have identified a potential compensation pot as one potential incentive. A percentage of the scheme membership money could be match-funded by Government to create compensation for destroyed stock in the unfortunate event of an outbreak. We successfully lobbied the EU to get compensation for ornamentals in the new Plant Health Policy, and the UK is now starting to implement this, so the time is right to test the cost-sharing value of this idea.

To increase membership of the plant health assurance scheme, we also talked about infrastructure investment incentives, and this one could work on all sorts of levels. One of the main reasons for such high numbers of imported plants is that other countries' governments, particularly the Dutch, have invested in their nursery industry, making them more efficient to the point of out-competing the UK producers. A simple rebate scheme for UK ornamental nurseries, along the lines of the British Film industry, could go a long way in incentivising nursery expansion. This would bring economic benefits for the UK as well as reducing biosecurity risk.

The next steps are to survey growers fully to gather evidence for the key decisions around membership costs, audit costs, training needs, and the likely take-up at the start. At the same time, we need to develop the thinking around incentives and create some appealing proposals before the scheme launches. We also need to create the training for nursery staff, especially risk management. And we need to decide how a scheme like this is governed and run. As a trade body, HTA is well placed to manage, market and administer a Plant Health Assurance Scheme, but given the high-stakes nature of what we are trying to achieve, do we need a broader governance to ensure independence from trade and joined-up approaches with all relevant sectors?

Collaboration is key - we work together with the Ornamental Horticulture Roundtable Group, the Plant Health Forum and Tree Health Policy Group. Amongst the many good ambitions which the industry recognises in the Government's 25-Year Environment Plan, we welcome the stated ambition to improve biosecurity and help the industry to get this scheme to work. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Nicola Spence, her team, and the Government, in delivering our UK biosecurity responsibilities.

