

## COMMITTEES

### Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee Reference – Inquiry into administration of quarantine

17 August 2006

**Senator MILNE** (Tasmania) (4.52 p.m.)—In recent years, the conference of the parties to the Convention for the Protection of Biodiversity concluded that the two greatest threats to global biodiversity at the beginning of the 21st century are habitat loss and alien invasive species, both accelerated by human induced global warming and globalisation—in particular, globalised trade. We know, as Tim Low said in his book *Feral Future*, that people and their products are crisscrossing the world as never before and, on the new global highways so created, plants and animals are travelling too. On top of this, domesticated plants and animals are escaping our control on an unprecedented scale. A globalisation of ecology is under way, with profound implications for us all. Just as American pop music, blue jeans, burgers and coke have displaced Indigenous cultures and foods in every land, so too are vigorous, exotic invaders overwhelming native species and natural habitats. Some biologists warn of a ‘McDonaldisation’ of world ecology. The earth is hurtling towards one world culture and maybe one world ecosystem.

That is the context in which I rise today to support the motion by Senator O’Brien to refer this matter to the Senate Rural and Regional and Transport Legislation Committee for inquiry to look at the effectiveness of our administration arrangements for managing quarantine and to look specifically at whether it is appropriate to split up the people who are looking at keeping alien invasive species out of Australia and others who are looking at trying to contain and eradicate within Australia’s borders. Also, we are trying to look at whether we have the right legislative and regulatory unpinning of import risk assessment and we should be looking at the whole issue of appropriate levels of protection and the role, if any, of ministers in making final decisions.

I am not in any way influenced by the New South Wales Farmers’ Federation, the National Farmers’ Federation or any particular interest group. I am motivated by the fact that week by week we see scientific and media reports of yet more species in Australia—the mix of Australia’s biodiversity—going to extinction because of the impact of alien invasive species. I talk to farmers who are really worried about the spread of alien invasive species and the seeming inability of authorities to control them. That is why we should be having another look at it, because circumstances have changed dramatically. There is no doubt about world trade and globalisation. That is obvious to all. You only have to look at the number of containers on Australian wharves to see the bulk freight that is going around, not to mention a whole range of other pathways into the country.

But, also, the situation has changed. My view is that at the moment we have a system which is too reactive. We need a much more precautionary approach, a much more preventative approach, an approach based on biointelligence. We talk about security intelligence—that we need to be out in the world and the region looking for intelligence. Yet we do not have the same approach with our whole biosecurity quarantine system. I would argue that the system as it currently is focuses way too much on a trade and primary industry priority when it should be looking at the whole of biodiversity conservation, because in that context you will capture primary industry as well. We also need the capacity for cost-effective and timely intervention. We have seen, as I will outline in a moment, that that has not occurred with a number of issues.

I will start by talking about fire blight and Tasmanian apples, and the threat to the apple industry in that state if we import apples from New Zealand. The issue is that it has been going on for so long that we are now into the third review and there is no analysis yet of the submissions that have been put in—or at least no consideration of those submissions, at this point, has been made public. But the point is that this has been going on for a very long time, and it has been up to growers to point out the problems with the modelling. Time and time again, what has emerged is that there has been a failure to take into account regional differences in a country the size of Australia. That is an issue that the growers are incredibly frustrated about. My colleague Senator Siewert will take that up in a minute because the same thing applies in her state of Western Australia. It has been a combined effort between growers and industry groups, particularly in Western Australia and Tasmania, that has got it to the point that it is at now.

But I also want to talk about the fact that we have a situation where in April 2005 the Taiwanese announced that they would not be taking Australian fruit because of the Queensland fruit fly and that all Australian fruit would be banned from export to Taiwan in the period after that. Australia secured an exemption from that—or at least a delay until January 2006—in which time our quarantine authority, AQIS, were meant to provide the technical information to Taiwan to demonstrate those areas that should be exempted from the ban. It did not happen. We have growers all over Australia frustrated that it took so long to get the technical information to give Australian growers—who ought to have still had access to the Taiwanese market—that ability.

Tasmania since then has been able to get the exemption. But there are growers in other areas in Australia, apart from the Riverland in Tasmania, who would desperately like to be accessing the Taiwanese market. They complain that there has not been a proactive effort to secure access to that market, because the response was not timely and certainly has not been cost effective in terms of the growers. There are many growers out there who are concerned at the moment that they still will not be able to get their harvest into the Taiwanese market this year, and that is weighing heavily upon them. They not only have to deal with the worst drought we have had in a very long time, with issues about water and other matters, but also do not feel that they have been adequately responded to on their demand that this matter be expedited.

We also have the situation at the moment of the closure of the wild abalone fishery in Bass Strait as a precautionary measure. That is because of the discovery in Victoria of a particular herpes virus. And this is where I come to this issue of bio-intelligence. We know that in 2003 this virus was particularly bad in the southern part of China, in Taiwan and in California. Why, at that point, did we not look at whether we were importing into Australia, as fish food, bycatch from those areas that could well have been affected by this virus? Now we are in the situation where quarantine authorities are saying, 'We cannot be sure whether the virus came to the fish farms from the wild or vice versa.' But what we ought to have done, after seeing that this disease had broken out—recognising that we farm abalone and that we bring food into this country for those abalone farms—was pre-empt this issue and get out there with some proactive what I would call bio-intelligence.

We had the same issue with the mass mortality of pilchards when bycatch from overseas was brought in and fed into the tuna farms at Port Lincoln. From there it escaped into the wild fishery. As a result of that, we now have a situation where every few years there is a mass death of pilchards. In Tasmania, we are seeing our amphibian population wiped out by chytrid fungus. We think that that most

likely came into Tasmania from the mainland on bananas. And now our green-and-gold frog and probably another two species in Tasmania are endangered and facing extinction because of that chytrid fungus.

It may shock the Senate to know that our quarantine arrangements are working. For example, a cane toad was found in Devonport. We know that they are in northern New South Wales, but we know that the bioclimatic changes occurring will make it possible for them to survive much further south than previously. So we need to really strongly consider climate change, and I do not see that happening as a preventative approach, in the manner that I am speaking about. We need to recognise that the climatic zones have changed so that, for example, diseases that previously could not survive in Tasmania or southern Australia, because of weather patterns, now can. We need that kind of assessment to be worked out between Biosecurity Australia, AQIS, the CSIRO, the Bureau of Meteorology and so on. We need to start looking at the impacts of climate change. We are seeing it already in Tasmania: the sea urchin, which previously could not live in Tasmanian waters, is now moving strongly into the east coast of Tasmania, eating into the giant kelp beds which are the nursery for our rock lobster fishery.

So we have all sorts of problems because of alien invasive species coming from either outside the country or other parts of Australia, plus we have that expanded habitat range for disease that we can now expect because of climate change. That is why I am suggesting that we strongly need to look at this issue again—because, as times change, the focus has to change.

The Tasmanian devil is likely to be extinct in the wild in Tasmania in the very foreseeable future, which would be an absolute tragedy. No-one ever thought that, after the thylacine, that would be the situation with another iconic creature, but it has occurred in relation to the Tasmanian devil. That comes around again to the lack of an adequate surveillance pattern, a lack of adequate communication between the federal and state authorities, and a lack of adequate funding. We have differential processes between the states and we do not have adequate surveillance.

Overseas, for example, you have to have evidence of absence of disease. Because of cutbacks in funding in recent years, we have shifted to a focus where, if there is an absence of evidence that a disease exists, that is enough to say that you are disease free—and that is completely the wrong way of looking at it. If we had had evidence of absence of disease as a priority in Tasmania, we would have had public testing and public awareness of the devil disease back in the mid-nineties and we would not have had the delay that we have had in recognising the severity of the disease. That is the difference that has occurred in recent years.

That devil disease is going to have a major impact, because it comes with proof of the introduction of the fox into Tasmania. Again, this is where science and politics come together. We know that a fox escaped from Agfest in 2001—there were two people who came forward with a statutory declaration saying they saw it—and one was seen on the Illawarra Road, five kilometres from the Agfest site, at the time. The action that was taken then was to almost dismiss that as proof. Whatever you want to say about the introduction of the fox into Tasmania, it is a failure of our quarantine service. And now we have a situation where the Tasmanian devil is in decline. The devil was previously a predator and has, one would hope, been a predator to baby foxes. Now, with the devil being wiped out, the fox is likely to breed up as a predator. That goes hand in hand with feral cats,

which are not only predators to our small mammals but also carry toxoplasmosis into the wild, and we are finding more and more native animals that are blind because of that toxoplasmosis.

We have a report—we know it is true—of feral ferrets in the penguin community on the Neck at Bruny Island. We have tourists turning up to the Neck at Bruny Island and we know that we have a feral ferret population there. The thing I cannot understand is why we cannot eradicate them. There is a defined penguin colony area; I do not see why we cannot go in and eradicate that feral ferret population right now. But that is not happening.

My motivation in supporting this particular reference is to be able go back and have a look at what is going on and say, 'What is it that leads us to be too slow and to not look at the cost-effectiveness of investment in this area in terms of a preventative approach, so that we do not lose millions of dollars in lost exports, animals, plants, crops and so on?' That question—the big picture—is not being considered a lot of the time.

I think we need to be identifying new pathways. Antarctica is a new pathway for the introduction of disease to Tasmania. We are going to see more and more people coming via Antarctica into Tasmania because of the air link and more cruise ships. Cruise ships are another pathway that has not really been looked at as seriously as it might be. A few years ago a lettuce aphid came into Tasmania from New Zealand. At that time, a cruise ship was docked in Devonport, having come from New Zealand. Many of us believed that the aphid came from the kitchen refuse from that cruise ship. The official explanation at the time was that it had come here on the wind from New Zealand. The problem is that the wind blows in the opposite direction—and I doubt the ability of an aphid to fly against the prevailing winds all the way from New Zealand to the north-west coast of Tasmania.

That is what I mean about science and politics. Sometimes the threat of trade sanctions and the worry about the impact on trading partners may well prevent the publicity, the public education and so on that are needed. We need to have a much greater public awareness of the importance of alien invasive species in destroying our biodiversity and our primary industry sector. I do not think we are well served by the split that has occurred with Biosecurity Australia and AQIS. I would really like to hear evidence about that split and any effect there may have been since those changes. I do not think we are acting quickly enough. I think that has been demonstrated by the Tasmanian example with fire blight and the case of the Queensland fruit fly and the impact on growers around Australia of the Taiwanese ban. Those examples show me that we are not reacting quickly enough.

But, overwhelmingly, my issue is that we need a bigger picture approach. We need a bio-intelligence approach. We need to be out there looking at where the possible threats are coming from. We need to be assessing changes due to global warming and the likely changed habitats of disease and invasive species. That is why I think it would be a really good thing if this Senate committee had a look at the big picture once again and stopped taking a very defensive approach. I am disappointed that the government has taken a defensive approach. If there is one thing that this parliament ought to be doing it is protecting Australia's biodiversity as much as possible by having a risk assessment process that is rigorously science based but takes into account the new science, the new threats, the emerging disease threats and the new pathways and looks at whether our processes are adequate to the task.

You only have to look at this week's *Weekly Times* cover, headed 'Diseases slip through lapsed quarantine nets', to see the kind of concern that is out there in the farming community. I urge the government to reconsider its position on this matter. This is not about playing politics; this is about making sure we protect Australia, Australian primary producers and our biodiversity—both marine and terrestrial—into the future in the face of one of the greatest drivers of extinction and loss, and that is alien invasive species.