

APFA Supports Import Moratorium in Australia

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Australia is a federation. Animal quarantine at the national level is managed by the federal government's Australian Quarantine & Inspection Service (AQIS). Policy decisions on imports are made by AQIS' newly established Biosecurity Australia division. Under the Australian Constitution, states also have responsibility and power to manage and regulate animal health.

The critical need for intergovernmental cooperation on these issues was highlighted this past December, after the discovery that uncooked WSSV-infected shrimp imported from Indonesia were fed to crabs at the Northern Territory's Darwin Aquaculture Centre and prawns in tanks at the Northern Territory University. Both facilities were quarantined and cleaned, and subsequent testing confirmed white spot is not present in Australian farmed prawns. Australia maintains its disease-free status.

However, there are many unanswered questions relating to quarantine in Australia. Due to the Darwin incident, APFA is seeking an immediate short-term moratorium on uncooked prawn imports and the establishment of a senate inquiry into the AQIS prawn and prawn-related products risk analysis.

Temporary Moratorium

When a critical quarantine decision is made, it is standard practice for the federal government to consult the states. In this case, all Australian states with established prawn farms – New South Wales, Queensland, and the

Northern Territory – support the industry's call for a temporary moratorium on uncooked prawn imports from countries unable to demonstrate freedom from WSSV.

This is a precautionary and responsible position for the states to adopt in the face of what could have been a potential crisis for the Australian seafood industry. The federal government, however, chose a less precautionary approach, and the AQIS ban on importation of "bait prawns" implemented in 1996 continues to be flouted.

Risk Analysis

Following the WSSV scare, government investigations established about 10 tons of prawns entered Australia from Indonesia through an importer in Perth. Of this, approximately five tons were illegally distributed for bait in states and territories. The investigations also confirmed that improper labeling is common practice in exporting countries and Australia.

In September 2000, AQIS completed an import risk analysis for prawns and prawn-related products. It considered the risk of disease transmission to the marine environment "low," and recommended introduction of a permit system that would allow further imports of uncooked prawns from disease-affected countries.

APFA believes Australia's prawn risk analysis is fatally flawed. In February, AQIS introduced a "testing regime" for raw prawn imports from countries unable to demonstrate freedom from WSSV. The association has requested more information on the regime, but industry believes the testing regime is questionable.

Therefore the association remains strongly committed to a short-term moratorium and full inquiry, until such time as adequate long-term measures are implemented to protect Australia's disease-free status.