

Issue 3
July 2012



CHESTNUT *CARE*

Spotted
anything
unusual?

For some people involved with chestnut production the detection of the exotic fungus disease chestnut blight in 2010 has led to a blur of information coming from various sources. I am writing on behalf of the Chestnut Biosecurity Officer Project. Horticulture Australia funded the project using chestnut levy contributions matched by funds from the Australian Government.

This project is actually coming to an end so this is the final opportunity in this forum to repeat some basic biosecurity messages.

As a final effort I would like to provide some trends from a recent project survey and leave some space for Brendan Ralph, (DPI Biosecurity Victoria). Brendan will give a blight update as his team completes the Winter surveillance program that is currently in progress.

This project which arose from the 2010 detection of chestnut blight, had a simple aim and that was to improve biosecurity awareness in the Australian chestnut industry. This project newsletter was developed and was the key platform to provide specific biosecurity messages to a broad audience. A capacity to conduct on-farm visits was offered to producers particularly in the vicinity of the known chestnut blight detection sites. I am the first to admit that not every person has been visited because the short project timeframe has only allowed so much to be done.

One thing I have tried to do in lieu of directly contacting 'everyone' has been to get the biosecurity message to as broad an audience as possible. CAI, TAFCO, and DPI (Victoria) have certainly assisted with this process.



The biosecurity message is now everywhere. At a CAI February 4 Field Day DPI (Victoria) staff Martin Mebalds (on the left) and Brendon Ralph gave a practical demonstration on equipment hygiene and the use of disinfection agents. Equipment hygiene is an integral component of any industry biosecurity program.

'This' newsletter has been sent to approximately 200 known chestnut producers and the broader message has been extended to an even larger audience via some media articles and the TAFCO shareholder list. DPI (Victoria) biosecurity staff actually conducted our second project newsletter mail-out for us in an effort to get to as many commercial, small scale, and amenity chestnut tree owners as possible.

I think it has been lost on some people just what has happened since that fateful confirmation of the *Cryphonectria parasitica* fungus in 2010. The Victorian chestnut blight outbreak initiated a concerted response from Commonwealth and State Government agencies as well as industry.

Widespread field surveys in chestnut production areas across several states have occurred. In Victoria DPI (Victoria) responded quickly setting up an Incident Management Team (IMT) with trained staff. Also, in the period soon after detection a national cost-sharing response to eradicate the disease was arranged. An

Emergency Chestnut blight National Management Group agreed to a Plant Pest Response Plan targeting the eradication of chestnut blight from Victoria was approved. It was implemented by DPI (Victoria). The Response Plan has involved widespread field surveys, the destruction of infected and at risk trees, and an ongoing surveillance strategy.

The chestnut industry has also responded significantly to the 'blight effort'. There have been specific CAI campaigns and on the ground practice change by individual growers. Therefore a lot has happened and a lot has been achieved. At times, some individuals may question some policies and activities. However, make no mistake it has been important to do all of this as well as to keep getting the biosecurity message out because it really is the people factor that can make or break all of the effort that has gone into getting rid of the exotic chestnut blight fungus.

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The Chestnut Industry Biosecurity Officer project is funded by HAL using the chestnut levy and matched funds from the Australian Government.



Horticulture Australia



A Project Survey

A survey to capture biosecurity awareness and practice change amongst chestnut growers was developed to 'finish off' this project. There were basic questions on current practices and attitudes. The survey, which had a total of 10 questions, was sent only to CAI members. This was done so that any results could be framed against a defined population. For example, 103 surveys were sent out and 56 returns were received over a ten day period. Although many of you have seen the survey I have included a copy of it in this newsletter so you can see the general question themes.

I have written a detailed survey results summary as part of a final project report. I cannot possibly discuss all the questions in this forum, however, I can make a few general statements and give some broad trends. The key survey themes focused on biosecurity awareness and practice change. The questions were simple but were framed against the following important factors:

The use of signage to discourage unchecked vehicle and people movement onto properties.

The use of fences and gates to restrict unchecked vehicle and people movement onto properties.

The use of disinfestations agents.

The benefit of dedicated wash-down areas for vehicles and equipment.

The role of people in the movement of disease propagules.

The role of tools and equipment in the movement of disease propagules.

The role of soil and plant material in the movement of disease propagules.

The importance of maintaining an ongoing positive attitude to the principles of biosecurity.

The survey results clearly indicated that there is an improving awareness of general biosecurity principles. In fact in response to a direct question relating to biosecurity awareness, close to 90 percent of respondents indicated their understanding had improved (since the detection of chestnut blight). Bear in mind too that some respondents were from producers from as far afield as Western Australia and Tasmania and may not have had as much 'exposure' to the message. Also positive, was the responses relating to practice change. Seventy percent of respondents acknowledged they have 'done something' since the detection of chestnut blight. This could be the use of signage, equipment cleaning, exclusion of vehicles, and so on. Whilst people may argue there is always room for improvement, clearly many producers have implemented change.



In an ideal world people (and vehicles) should have physical barriers such as gates and fences to restrict unchecked entry. The restriction of vehicle movement is one of the most basic of biosecurity principles. A little over eight five percent of survey respondents said 'Yes' they do aim to minimise unrestricted vehicle movement into their production areas. This is a fabulous result from a biosecurity perspective.



Visitors should be greeted by a sign that warns that practices relating to property entry have changed. Approximately 60 percent of survey respondents are using signage. Even though this project is finishing signage is still available through TAFCO or DPI.

Vehicles and machinery entering your property represent a great risk to your chestnut operation. Many respondents to the survey clearly indicated they are a 'closed shop'. In other words they believe 'outside' vehicles or machinery never enter their production area. This may well be the case but remember to be firm on the day that out of the blue a contractor or some other visitor arrives with their equipment to do some work on your property.



Written by Gary Baxter

Right now, many chestnut producers are likely to be pruning or renovating production areas. Remember the chestnut blight organism is a bark inhabiting fungus. The fungus predominantly affects the trunk and branches of a host. A clear message is that it is not good practice to simply cast aside pruned material or drag bigger branches or trunks to the perimeter of your block. This is because the 'waste' represents a potential source of risk.

Another clear message that for some of you has relevance right now is 'who' is coming onto your property and 'what tools' are they introducing. This is an area where diligence and attention to detail is critical. If there are 'small' tools being introduced onto your property you need to be quite insistent in your demands that 'hygiene is everything'. A little over 60 percent of survey respondents indicated they conduct some sort of cleaning process on small tools (such as secateurs and saws) used within their property. This is great but a key aspect of any disinfestation attempts is that it is done correctly. Any disinfestation of tools (or equipment) must commence with complete removal of soil and/or plant material because disinfectants will not penetrate organic material well. The key disinfestation agents likely to be used are based on chlorine, alcohol or quaternary ammonium products. Each of these has their pros and cons from both an efficacy and an occupational health and safety aspect. Do not forget this latter point.



A dedicated wash down area is great but not always practical. Many would argue a wash down area is not always necessary if you operate as a 'closed shop'. The above concrete wash down area was seen on one location. A little over one third of survey respondents said they have a dedicated wash down area on their property. Many who responded 'No' indicated they fall into the group that never has vehicles or 'outside' equipment entering their property.

If you are serious about on-farm biosecurity then footbaths, hand washes, machinery wash downs, and disinfectants became a way of life. Exactly 25 percent of survey respondents indicated they provide footbaths and/or hand washes for visitors or workers entering the production area. Purists will argue that this number highlights a need for improvement. However, given that there are so many unique situations amongst chestnut farmers this may not be as 'bad' as some will think. Many respondents made comments along the lines that they simply do not have casual labour or visitors entering their production area and therefore feel little need to establish footbaths and hand washes. I cannot make a judgement but the message of vigilance remains.



Chainsaws are highly problematic from a biosecurity perspective. They are exceptionally difficult to clean thoroughly and clearly they should not be moving from property to property which is very relevant right now as some producers are undertaking pruning and tree maintenance programs. A cursory wipe with a disinfestation agent is simply inadequate. Disinfectants are not penetrative, in other words you must completely remove any plant material such as sawdust from them before using a disinfestation agent. With a chainsaw, this implies dismantling and thorough cleaning which is both time consuming and difficult.



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The Biosecurity Officer Project and this newsletter have been funded by HAL using voluntary contributions from Chestnuts Australia Inc and TAFCO and matched funds from the Australian Government

Where to from here

In concluding this newsletter, and in fact this project, I would like to leave readers with a couple of final thoughts and a key message. Remember, you often cannot see what you are trying to protect yourself from. Spores, seeds and insects which are potentially the 'agents' of any pest or disease incursion are often tiny or even microscopic. This means that you often need to be taking steps to 'manage the invisible'. Bear this in mind as you consider a key biosecurity message:

'Small practice change can potentially have an industry wide influence'

The Plant Health Australia organisation has been very supportive of this small project and very generous with the provision of information. I would like to again encourage those of you who are serious about biosecurity to visit the Plant Health Australia website at: www.planthealthaustralia.com.au 'Click' on Farm Biosecurity Program under the National Programs heading. Also remember to have a glance at the DPI (Victoria) publication Chestnut Blight - farm hygiene. It is a user-friendly chestnut industry biosecurity update and available from Brendan Ralph (0357311207) at the DPI (Victoria) Ovens location.

You will see that regardless of which industry you examine and who you talk to, the biosecurity message has a consistent ring to it. It is not going to go away. If you are serious about modern horticulture, whatever the scale of your operation, you need to take sensible steps to manage it.

If you take it as a given that chestnut blight spores and other pest and disease organisms can spread via farm operations, then you potentially have an issue to be concerned about. The decision you, as a grower will need to make is how far do you go? And yes, some of you will say I have heard it all before; footbaths, hand washes and equipment cleaning, what difference will it make? At this point individuals have to make up their own minds but remember again that 'small practice changes can potentially have an industry wide influence'.

Chestnut Blight - Winter Survey

By Brendan Ralph DPI 04/07/12

The Winter survey has been completed.

As part of the Chestnut Blight response plan the 2012 winter survey has just been completed.

Over 1500 trees were inspected and were found to be clear of the disease.

Properties were also inspected for seedlings which may have generated and also any residual root material.

The next survey will commence in October and cover all the Ovens Valley as well as a selection from Beechworth, Stanley and the Kiewa Valley. It will take over three months to complete.



A member of the DPI (Victoria) chestnut blight surveillance team completing biosecurity cleaning protocols during an earlier survey. (Photo supplied by and used with the permission of Brendan Ralph DPI Victoria).

Chestnuts Australia Inc. (formally The Chestnut Growers of Australia Ltd) is a growers group which was formed in 1991.

Our membership is drawn from all over Australia and includes representation from suppliers and large commercial growers, hobby farm enthusiasts, nurserymen and women, Agriculture Departments and other horticultural experts.

Chestnuts Australia Inc. aims to assist its members with relevant information on the growing, harvesting and marketing of chestnuts.

Our organisation is dedicated to the growth of the Chestnut Industry through:

- Grower education
- Promotion
- Research
- Sharing of information

Informational updates are provided to our members at annual and special meetings, conferences, field days and farm walks which promote opportunities for personal contact with other grower members throughout the year.

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