

PRIMARY INDUSTRIES MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Communiqué

PIMC4

2 October 2003

Primary Industries Ministers from across Australia met in Perth on Friday 2 October 2003 to consider progress on issues impacting on Australia's primary production sector. This was the fourth meeting of the Primary Industries Ministerial Council. Specific issues dealt with by the Council are detailed below.

Drought and Climate Situation and Outlook

Ministers received an up-date from the Bureau of Meteorology on the climatic situation and noted that whilst there are early signs that climatic conditions are returning to more normal scenarios, some of Australia's principal agricultural regions continue to remain affected by drought. Low water storages levels also continue to be a problem in certain areas.

Ministers agreed that the Australian Government Minister for Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry will convene a national Roundtable in 2004 to discuss how future drought assistance can be made more efficient and effective. The Minister will also establish an independent panel to consult with stakeholders about drought assistance. This panel will provide a paper to the national Roundtable. Standing Committee will also develop a range of options for consideration by the Roundtable/independent panel. The outcome of the Roundtable will be considered by Australian Government and State/Territory governments.

Agricultural Trade Issues

Ministers noted that Free Trade Agreement negotiations with both the US and Thailand were fast approaching the scheduled dates for completion and discussed the state of play in the market access negotiations for agricultural products. Ministers also discussed the outcome of the WTO Ministerial Cancun meeting and the implications for the WTO negotiations on agriculture under the Doha Round. Despite the Cancun setback, Ministers emphasised the importance to agriculture and food exporters of Australia continuing to pursue reform of the multilateral trading system and working toward a completion of the Doha Round.

Ministers noted that a number of agriculture related WTO trade challenges would be starting the formal WTO dispute process shortly; including two challenges to Australia's quarantine controls. While it was far too early to tell whether these two disputes would have any implications for the Australian quarantine system, they reinforced the importance of sound science based quarantine arrangements to maintain Australia's relative pest and disease free status.

Ministers also noted recent agreements reached with China to progress cooperation on animal health and sanitary and phytosanitary issues including horticultural products, wheat and barley, which are important for Australian exports.

Biosecurity and Critical Infrastructure Protection

Council considered a range of important initiatives designed to better protect Australia's food chain (paddock to plate) from sabotage or accidental disruption. Council noted the cooperative approach being taken by the Australian Government, States and Territories and industry. It also noted that while currently there is no known threat to the food supply, these measures build upon the considerable work that has been done to date by Australian producers, food processors and governments that has underpinned the domestic and international confidence in Australian products.

FMD Simulation Exercise (Minotaur) Report to COAG

Council noted that the report on the outcomes of the national FMD simulation, Exercise Minotaur, held late last year, is in the process of being considered by senior officials of the Council of Australian Governments. Emergency prevention and preparedness work is continuing in all jurisdictions.

Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) - International Developments

Council considered a number of important animal health issues arising from the 'lessons learned' from the Canadian BSE incident. Given the significance of Australia's meat export industry, Council strongly agreed on the need to progress a range of measures immediately to strengthen BSE preparedness, including surveillance programs, auditing the effectiveness of ruminant feed bans, and pursuing appropriate amendments to international and domestic standards. Council also noted progress with the development of a Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE) Freedom Assurance Program.

National Livestock Identification and Tracing

Ministers noted that good progress is being made by States and Territories to implement the risk-based national approach to livestock identification and tracing for cattle and sheep, to be known as the National Livestock Identification System (Cattle) and National Livestock Identification System (Sheep) respectively. A number of States are in detailed consultation with their State-based industry organisations on the arrangements to apply in their jurisdictions. These arrangements include herd-based and flock-based identification and tracing mechanisms as well as individual (NLIS-approved) animal identification mechanisms for cattle.

A special Taskforce has been formed to oversight the national implementation strategy and is in the process of developing national performance standards for the systems and a national communication strategy.

While property of origin traceback systems are currently in place in Northern Australia, Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia are actively addressing issues of performance design to ensure system consistency and compatibility across these jurisdictions. The design of the national system for cattle in northern Australia will be finalised by 1 July 2004 and implemented by 1 July 2005.

Livestock Export Trade to the Middle East

Ministers share the concerns of all Australians about the welfare of livestock and agree that while the trade is a valuable alternative market for producers, it must be conducted in a humane manner. Ministers noted the measures implemented to mitigate livestock mortalities on voyages to the Middle East, since a spate of unacceptable mortality incidents in 2002.

Ministers discussed in detail the existing *Cormo Express* sheep shipment to the Middle East and noted community concern about the enforcement of animal welfare standards in the live sheep export industry. Council endorsed the need for the welfare of the sheep still on board to be paramount in resolving the existing situation. Ministers noted that the Australian Government would consult with the relevant jurisdiction if a decision was proposed to return the sheep to Australia and noted that the National Management Group has been activated.

A full investigation into the *Cormo Express* incident will be undertaken. Council also indicated its support for the establishment of an independent review of the live export industry to examine areas such as the adequacy of current regulatory arrangements for the live export trade.

Anthrax

Ministers noted that there is no unusual risk of anthrax from any source in the foreseeable future but this situation must be kept under review. Ministers agreed that Animal Health Australia, with technical input from the Animal Health Committee, would prepare a report on the full range of options to ensure sufficient vaccine is available when required and on encouraging the proper management, including prophylactic vaccination, of herds and flocks at risk from anthrax.

Layer Hen Welfare

Ministers noted progress across jurisdictions in implementing the range of layer hen welfare and egg labelling decisions taken by Council in 2000 and 2001.

Council has requested that the Primary Industries Standing Committee undertake an assessment of the costs and benefits of implementing the layer hen housing option originally agreed by the Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand (ARMCANZ) and a review of animal welfare benefits arising from the changes. Standing Committee will report back to Council at its next meeting in April 2004 and prior to the consideration of strategies to assist industry in making a transition to new standards.

Genetically Modified (GM) Crops

Ministers considered a range of issues related to the commercial introduction of genetically modified (GM) crops, after licensing for commercial release by the Gene Technology Regulator. These issues included government monitoring arrangements, market considerations in the light of the reports prepared by the Australian Government at the request of Council on the market experience and outlook for GM crops in Europe, Asia and other countries and on the trade and WTO aspects that need to be taken into account in Australia. Council also noted progress in industry arrangements and current international issues relating to the regulation of GM crops and food.

National Biosecurity System

Ministers were advised that the Australian Government, States and Territories have agreed to develop a proposal for a National Biosecurity System for managing the broader, longer-term biosecurity issues in relation to the management of animal, plant and marine pest and disease incursions. Council noted that a national approach to managing biosecurity issues would need to acknowledge the potential impact of pest and disease incursions on human health, the environment and natural resource management, as well as on primary production, and that, as a result, industry, health and environment agencies would need to be engaged on relevant issues. In this regard, Council agreed to put the proposal forward for consideration by the Natural Resource Management Standing Committee and Ministerial Council when they meet in April 2004.

Ministers noted that a national response has been agreed to the recommendations of the Review of Biosecurity at Plant Research Establishments and that the Plant Health Committee of Standing Committee is overseeing implementation of this response.

National Policy Framework for Co-investment in Afforestation and the Environment

Council agreed to work with the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council on the framework within which private and public investment in plantations could achieve environmental and economic goals. The potential role of reforestation in cost effectively addressing a range of environmental issues in low to medium rainfall areas has long been recognised.

Australian Rural Women's Trade Initiative

Council endorsed a recommendation by Standing Committee for the Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics (ABARE) to prepare a paper on the impacts of trade liberalisation on rural communities in developing and developed countries, and particularly on rural women in those countries.

The research will form the basis of a presentation by the Australian delegation to the IV World Congress of Rural Women to be held in South Africa in 2006.

National Ban on Tail Docking of Dogs

Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to implement a nationally coordinated ban on the routine tail docking of dogs for non-therapeutic (cosmetic) purposes. The key elements of the ban, to be implemented no later than 1 April 2004, will be that non-therapeutic tail docking of dogs will be prohibited and therapeutic tail docking of dogs will only be able to be carried out by a veterinarian.

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