

Managing the Impact of Plant and Animal Pests: A State-wide Challenge

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Background

Plant and animal pests can cause or have the potential to cause adverse impacts to agriculture, forests, the environment, social amenity and public health anywhere in the state. It is estimated that plant and animal pests cost Australian agriculture and livestock farming approximately \$5 billion per annum.

The management of pests involves the prevention of new incursions and the eradication, containment and management of established pests. This requires effective pre-border risk assessment, surveillance, border protection and post border response, monitoring and enforcement.

The *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007* (BAM Act) is the principal legislation for the management of pests within Western Australia. It establishes a regulatory framework to provide effective biosecurity and agricultural management and a state-wide response to pests. The Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia (DAFWA) administers the BAM Act.

In 2012-13, DAFWA spent \$14.6 million of its appropriated funds on border security and the management of declared pests. An additional \$3.1 million was funded from Royalties for Regions and contributions from the Commonwealth and other state governments. Community and industry groups spent a further \$6.3 million on pest control programs.

Controlling pests is complex and to be effective requires collaboration between stakeholders. There are 169 declared pests that can have a local, regional and state-wide impact. There are also thousands of landholders, including government agencies, who have responsibilities for managing pests. This includes the Department of Parks and Wildlife which has pest control responsibilities for just over 10 percent of the state.

Audit Conclusion

Western Australia is relatively free from many of the world's pests, plant and animal diseases, and no new pests have become established in the state since the arrival of the Cane Toad in 2009. However, it is difficult to verify how effectively established pests are managed throughout the state.

DAFWA's priority is to prevent new pests and plant and animal diseases entering the state, and to enable early intervention in eradicating those pests that do enter. This represents the area of greatest economic return in the control of pests.

For pests that are already established in the state, DAFWA undertakes some pest control activities itself and has formed partnerships with some regional and local groups. This reflects the fact that DAFWA cannot effectively manage all established pests state-wide on its own, and needs the cooperation and collaboration of landholders and other government agencies. However, current levels of cooperation and collaboration fall short of those needed and envisaged in the BAM Act.

An effective state-wide pest management framework is not yet in place. Specifically, there is no integrated state-wide plan, and information on the impact of established pests is limited. The prioritisation of some established pests and programs over others is not always clear and DAFWA conducts little or no enforcement activity to ensure landholders control pests on their land.

Individually, these issues raise concerns about whether resources are effectively used and targeted and whether landholders are controlling established pests on their land. Taken together and over time they expose the state to an increased risk that established pests will spread and have a growing impact on agriculture, forests, the environment, social amenity and public health.



Office of the Auditor General Western Australia

Key Findings

- The BAM Act's purpose of providing for the state-wide management of pests has not yet been achieved. The framework under which agencies, industry and community groups set priorities, allocate funds and work in partnership is not fully established. There is no integrated state-wide plan for managing pests and agencies' roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined leading to gaps in pest management. DAFWA acknowledges this and is working on a state biosecurity strategy for Western Australia and a memorandum of understanding between agencies.
- There is no up to date picture of the spread, abundance and impact of established pests. As a result, it is difficult to determine if the impact of pests is increasing, or to assess how effective control mechanisms are in managing established pests. The lack of up to date information limits the state's ability to adapt pest management practices and target resources to changing threats and priorities.
- DAFWA policies and procedures for declaring species as pests are still 'draft' and there is no public information for stakeholders on how to submit a proposal to declare a species a pest or the criteria used to assess the threat. This increases the risk that emerging pest species may not be identified.
- The threat posed by established pests has not been regularly reviewed and it is not always clear why one pest is prioritised over another for funding. It is difficult to give assurance that DAFWA's limited resources are allocated on the basis of greatest return. DAFWA has started an assessment of the status of declared plants and plans to use impact assessment and a cost benefit analysis to prioritise its control programs. A similar process is planned for animal pests.
- There is limited monitoring and almost no enforcement of landowner responsibilities to control established pests. This increases the risk that some landholders will not control pests if there is no prospect of enforcement. DAFWA informed us that resource reductions have limited its capacity to conduct enforcement.
- DAFWA captures activity based data such as the number of baits laid, area covered and pests killed for key pest control programs. However, this data does not measure how effective its operational activities are in reducing adverse impacts. DAFWA plans to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework to provide better information on outcomes.



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