

Review of the Bulk Fertilizer Import Protocol

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Chemical fertilizer is recognised by AQIS as a significant quarantine risk due to its potential to be contaminated with quarantine risk materials such as grain, seeds and animal material, and its direct application to soil in agricultural areas. Quarantine concerns associated with fertilizer imports into Australia have increased since the detection of karnal bunt in the USA in 1995, together with other potential pests and diseases of quarantine concern. From this time onwards, AQIS began intensive inspection practices for all shipments of chemical fertilizer. On occasions where quarantine risk material was discovered in shipments of chemical fertilizer, the cargo was subsequently directed for treatment, or in some cases, re-export. Detection of quarantine risk material has significant implications for industry, such as the significant cost of re-exporting a consignment.

The quarantine risks associated with bulk imported fertilizer consignments were initially managed by AQIS through the use of in hold inspection for all shipments. These inspections were associated with a range of risks as entering empty or partially full holds exposed officers to falls from heights up to 25 metres, as well as toxic gases, oxygen depletion and engulfment. The work was also very specialised and quite strenuous, which meant relevant officers had to undertake extensive training with frequent re-accreditation.

A review commenced in 2003 to improve the management of risks associated with the import of chemical fertiliser. AQIS and Industry worked together throughout the review, which resulted in the development of revised protocols for bulk chemical fertilisers. The system was introduced in early 2004, supported by the establishment of the Fertilizer National Coordination Centre (NCC) at the AQIS Newcastle office. The NCC acts as a specialist source of information for all fertiliser related issues, as well as managing the supply chain assessment processes.

The revised protocols use a three tier management system, based on the level of risk posed by particular supply chains.

- Level One is the lowest risk classification under the protocol. Achievement of a Level one supply chain status meant bulk fertilizer could be imported through a certified and accredited supply chain without the need for in hold intervention. However, AQIS will still board the vessel to determine that it has not carried any actionable cargo and will also confirm there are no obvious signs of contamination. All elements of a Level one supply chain have been audited and assessed by AQIS and meet reduced risk requirements.
- Level Two is obtained where some elements of the supply chain have been audited, but a complete picture is not available. In general, the requirements of a Level Two supply chain are that the manufacturer/load port is audited by AQIS every three years, the manufacturer has provided a declaration for each consignment and that the vessel has not carried actionable cargo within the last six voyages.
- Level Three risk classification results when insufficient information is available to enable a shipment to be classified as Level One or Level Two. These shipments are treated as high risk cargo and require more extensive AQIS intervention, such as sampling and the performance of initial, intermediate and final hold inspections by AQIS.

Since its introduction in 2004 no shipments have required re-export and no consignments have been imported with significant contamination. This is largely attributed to the number of supply chains achieving Level One classification. The majority of shipments imported into Australia are now imported under Level One conditions.

One of the key benefits for AQIS as a result of the new protocols is that fewer in hold inspections are required as supply chains move towards level one certification. This reduces occupational health and safety risks for the organisation. AQIS is also able to address a greater proportion of quarantine risks offshore. Finally, the NCC model which was tried for the first time in the fertiliser context has become the model for the establishment of other NCCs across the country. Industry have also experienced significant benefits as a result of the protocols, primarily the reduced likelihood of quarantine risks being detected on arrival and a more stable supply chain. AQIS inspection fees are also lower for each shipment under the revised protocols. Another potential benefit for industry is that the supply chain management approach and AQIS certification may assist in demonstrating to other importing countries that the supply chain presents a reduced risk.

Since the introduction of the protocols, both AQIS and industry have been able to meet a number of additional challenges in the protocols process including travel limitations, drought and competing resource requirements. The continued healthy working relationship between AQIS and FIFA has meant that all challenges have been successfully overcome.

Building on the success of the bulk protocol, AQIS will be applying the systems and processes developed to the containerised fertilizer pathway, and could also extend the principles to other commodities and risk pathways.