

*'We often, in Australia, have a view that the moment we lock something up in some way and protect it from people, it is therefore protected and don't worry about the ongoing threat of invasive species, whether they're feral animals or weeds.'* Environment Minister Tony Burke (2011)

## Introduction

Australia urgently needs a more ecological, coordinated and collaborative approach to environmental biosecurity. As one of the top three threats to Australia's biodiversity, invasive species are overwhelming the capacity of current biosecurity systems and are set to worsen under climate change.

It will not be sufficient to bolt on environmental responsibilities to existing structures and cultures. Given current biodiversity decline, the complexity and scale of environmental challenges warrants a comprehensive biosecurity focus facilitated by a new national body engendering community participation.

## The proposal

The establishment of a national body, Environment Health Australia, that brings together major participants in environmental biosecurity, effectively involves the community sector, and facilitates a cross-jurisdictional, cross-sector collaboration to achieve much stronger environmental biosecurity. It would be similar to and collaborate with Animal Health Australia and Plant Health Australia.

## Background

### Threat level

*'The impacts of invasive species are now considered to pose a threat to Australian biodiversity of the same order as habitat loss and climate change.'*

Federal Environment Department (2008)

## Biodiversity goals

Target 9 of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 (under the Convention on Biological Diversity) is: *'By 2020, invasive alien species and pathways are identified and prioritized, priority species are controlled or eradicated, and measures are in place to manage pathways to prevent their introduction and establishment.'*

Target 7 of the Australian Biodiversity Conservation Strategy is: *'By 2015, reduce by at least 10% the impacts of invasive species on threatened species and ecological communities in terrestrial, aquatic and marine environments.'*

## What needs to change?

Under current approaches, invasive species threats will grow rather than decline, particularly in combination with climate change. There is no realistic way of meeting environmental goals unless we substantially improve biosecurity preparedness and responses. Changes needed include:

- Baseline information about threats and pathways
- Greater community awareness and involvement
- Priorities for research and management based on conservation criteria
- Integration across jurisdictions, across land tenures, between sectors (including environmental and agricultural departments)
- Recognition of differences between environmental and industry biosecurity while maximising the potential for cooperation

- More effective implementation of agreed hierarchy of prevention, eradication, containment, control across the landscape.

## Proposed functions

### Create strong environmental biosecurity foundations

**Eg.** Develop and promote more ecologically informed approaches to protect species, ecological communities and ecological processes from invasive species through partnerships with biosecurity and research organisations.

### Improve Australia's biosecurity preparedness

**Eg.** Develop biosecurity plans for high-risk potential environmental invaders, and surveillance protocols for environmental incursions, undertake foresighting and reporting to identify emerging and future threats, and develop strategies to limit the exacerbation of invasive species impacts under climate change.

**Eg.** Make recommendations on more effective policy and regulation for environmental biosecurity.

### Promote effective responses to environmental invasions

**Eg.** Participate in National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement processes and commission, coordinate, facilitate and manage nationally agreed environmental health and biosecurity projects, and lead preparation of AusEnvPlans to establish detailed emergency response arrangements under NEBRA.

## Enhance community awareness, vigilance and action in biosecurity

**Eg.** Build public awareness of environmental biosecurity and support the community to become involved in biosecurity policy development and implementation, develop best practice communication and community activation approaches in environmental biosecurity, and harness support of foundations and NGOs.

## Improve environmental biosecurity capacity – knowledge, people and resources

**Eg.** Facilitate governments, community groups and researchers to work together to improve environmental health in Australia, identify high priority research needs for environmental biosecurity, and identify and prioritise invasive species management actions which can be implemented to deliver carbon offsets.

**Eg.** Develop, with state and federal regulatory partners, an invasive species offsets policy that directs offset payments to mitigate priority invasive species threats.

## Improve coordination and collaboration between jurisdictions, agencies and sectors

**Eg.** Collaborate with industry biosecurity bodies to jointly develop biosecurity responses where invaders have both environmental and industry impacts, and conduct joint research projects.

## Monitor and report on Australia's progress in environmental biosecurity

**Eg.** Develop indicators for monitoring progress on meeting environmental biosecurity targets, and monitor

and report on the establishment, spread and containment of ecologically important invasive species.

## Structure and membership

Environment Health Australia would be structured to foster partnerships between major participants and stakeholders in environmental biosecurity and promote collaboration with industry bodies where there are shared interests. This proposal does not nominate a particular structure for EHA. One potential model is that of Plant Health Australia and Animal Health Australia. Potential members include:

- Federal Government: environment and biosecurity agencies
- State/Territory Governments: environment and biosecurity agencies
- Environmental NGOs with an environmental biosecurity focus
- Indigenous land management organizations
- NRM and conservation land management organisations
- Research institutions focused on biosecurity and ecology
- Professional bodies for people involved in environmental biosecurity
- Environmental and allied primary production industry bodies.

## Biosecurity solutions need the community sector

*'Engagement with business and the general community on biosecurity must occur consistently and continually at several levels, from policy setting through co-regulatory alternatives to actions by individuals and companies, before, at and after the border.'*

Beale review of quarantine and biosecurity

The Government's greatest ally in achieving stronger environmental biosecurity is the community. Biodiversity conservation requires a much more biosecurity active and aware community.

Currently, community sectors are mostly involved in on-ground control of invasive species but have little role in shaping biosecurity policies and priorities. There has been only a limited role for these sectors in most biosecurity institutions, in contrast to the active role they play in other environmental policy areas.

While industry bodies have a commercial incentive to participate in biosecurity, the community sector needs support to attain the knowledge and resource capacity necessary for productive participation in biosecurity.

The community sector should have similar opportunities to those of industry to shape biosecurity policy. Meaningful involvement of the community can be expected to unleash significant creativity and resources, producing far better results than government might otherwise afford.

## Contact

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