The Pest Wars – a note from the trenches

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Painted Apple Moth (PAM) is currently a high-profile biosecurity issue that provides a timely opportunity to review where we are at with biosecurity management at a national level.

PAM arrived in New Zealand several years ago and established in two areas of Auckland, MAF having responsibility for such incursions. Undertook a range of activities with the objective of eradication. The threat posed by PAM to forestry, horticulture, agriculture, and importantly to indigenous ecosystems, is significant, and indicated that eradication was clearly the best course of action.

Initially eradication was attempted through ground control activities only. While these techniques appear to have been successful in one of the infested areas (in Mt Wellington), in the other site in West Auckland, ground control has not been successful. Targeted aerial spraying of this area was started in early 2002, providing an 85-90% reduction in the moth population in the spray zone after six sprays.

Government is now considering proposals to widen the spray area to enhance the likelihood of eradication. The New Zealand Institute of Forestry wrote to Jim Sutton (Minister for Biosecurity) urging the Government to continue with the eradication programme because PAM is a known threat to a range of significant species, a potential threat to many other species, the relatively early stage of the aerial response and the confidence the Technical Advisory Group has in the ability to eradicate this pest.

An important consideration is the credibility of New Zealand’s response capability in the event of a biosecurity incursion. There has been considerable public interest in the management of the PAM incursion, and considerable inconvenience to members of the public in the West Auckland area. Support for the programme continues at a high level with the majority of affected people wanting eradication to be completed as quickly as possible.

These same people stand a good chance of being the centre of future incursions due to the likelihood of future pests entering via the international ports in Auckland. Achieving the necessary public support for any future incursion response in these areas is likely to be severely compromised if the public feel they were inconvenienced for no good reason with PAM. This response is likely if there is an early end to the current programme without satisfactory explanations. Simply saying that it has got beyond us is likely to confirm their fears that the programme has not been well managed, thus increasing the probability of opposition to future responses.

With PAM tending to overshadow other biosecurity issues, it is vital we don’t lose sight of the big picture. There are many other incursions also being dealt with at the current time, with most appearing to have very positive results. These include termites in Otorohanga, the Red Fire Ant, *Uraba lugens* (a pest attacking eucalyptus in Mt Maunganui and Auckland) and the control of the spread of Dutch Elm Disease. These incursions are lower profile than PAM but are no less important. It is also significant that New Zealand has achieved incursion response outcomes that are the envy of many other countries.

PAM is a high profile pest with significant implications, whether it is eradicated or not. The war against the pest continues, and as with any war, there are costs, and usually a quick success is unlikely.

Most wars are fought around a set of principles that the combatant parties feel are not negotiable. In a war we will defend those principles for as long as we are able. Thus if we believe our set of principles is right then we cannot be deterred by every setback, and we must be in it for the long haul.

The war to defend our forests from external biosecurity threats is an ongoing one and will require substantial investment; in financial terms, and in research, planning and management.

One of the important principles we must retain is the credibility and robustness of our biosecurity systems and responses in the minds of our international trading partners (for phytosanitary reasons) and the New Zealand public. Frequent changes of direction or policy, inappropriate responses, duplication of effort and the like will erode our credibility faster than any other matter. Without the support of the New Zealand public, our biosecurity systems will crumble, as industry alone is not able to meet the threat. The wider community provides financial and political support for our biosecurity defence and response, as there is seen to be a significant component of public good.

In turn we must ensure that the systems we use are the best we can achieve for the funds invested, and that when we determine a response is appropriate, that we do everything possible to ensure the objective of that response is achieved.

Biosecurity is and always will be an ongoing battle. We must strive for continuous improvements in our systems and responses. We must take the public seriously as a stakeholder and ensure they are getting value for the investment they make. What we cannot afford to do is be wavered from our principles in protecting all of New Zealand’s forests regardless of their location, species makeup or function.

Tough decisions are part of the turf in wars as they are in biosecurity. Wars can never be won if the tough go home as soon as the going gets tough.

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