

# Bananas from the Philippines assessment

Final engagement report

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry



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# Acknowledgment of Country

Articulous respectfully acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians. We recognise their cultures, histories and diversity, and their continuing connection to the lands, waters and seas of Australia and the Torres Strait.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and Traditional Owners of the many lands where we meet, work, learn and connect. We pay our respects to all Elders past, present and emerging.

# Executive summary

- Articulous was engaged by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) to facilitate five public sessions with banana growers in Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia.
- The purpose of the sessions were twofold:
  - give a detailed explanation of the context and rationale for DAFF's assessment of the Philippines' request for alternative measures for the importation of Cavendish bananas, and
  - provide a forum for growers and other stakeholders to express their concerns—and seek further information—directly from the department in their local community.
- The sessions followed a simple town hall format with Articulous leading facilitation and DAFF providing subject matter expertise.
- Although there were some regional variations in the areas of concern raised, the following represent the significant issues for stakeholders from across the five sessions. It is important to note the following points represent the **views of stakeholders only**. Although some stakeholder claims are supported—either wholly or partially—by existing evidence, **no further evidence was provided** at any of the five sessions to the Commonwealth or Articulous to substantiate any claims made by stakeholders. Key concerns raised included:
  - Trade with the Philippines is not needed to meet Australian demand for bananas.
  - Philippine bananas pose numerous biosecurity threats not present in Australia.
  - Accepting imports of Philippine bananas exposes Australian growers to significant risks without providing commensurate benefits to Australian consumers.
  - Philippine growing practices and compliance frameworks do not meet Australian standards.
  - Australia's assessment protocol of accepting 'low risk' or an incursion is not adequate (many stakeholders suggested that only 'zero risk' was acceptable).
  - The ongoing request for trade access from the Philippines creates investment uncertainty that is harming Australia's banana industry.
  - If trade access is granted, Australia will not be able to ensure the Philippines' compliance with mitigation measures, nor detect with certainty any potential quarantine failures before they clear quarantine.
  - Incursions that have occurred have not resulted in appropriate accountability.
  - Government support for industry when an incursion occurs is marked by uncertainty and inertia.
  - An incursion of any of the biosecurity threats known to be present in the Philippines could pose an existential threat to the Australian banana industry.

# Methodology

Articulous provided two staff to facilitate a series of events that provided opportunity for banana growers to:

- learn about the proposed assessment process
- raise initial thoughts, feelings and concerns about the import of bananas from the Philippines
- provide feedback on factors that should be considered in this assessment
- provide feedback on the assessment process.

## Facilitation

These meetings were facilitated with reference to the Australian National Mediator Standards. The facilitation team:

- assisted participants to define and clarify the issues under consideration
- assisted participants to communicate and exchange relevant information
- invited the clarification of issues and disputes to assist identification of options
- provided opportunities for understanding the background and current issues
- promoted a focus on the interests and needs of those who may be subject to, or affected by the situation.

## Meeting notes

The Articulous team summarised conversation points on large sticky notes that were kept in continual view of the audience. The Articulous team invited forum participants to review these wall notes before leaving and to add anything that was missed or any additional comments they wanted to make.

The purpose of these notes was to:

- promote the free flow of ideas and concerns
- demonstrate to forum participants that their thoughts and concerns were being recorded accurately.

These forum notes were photographed and are attached as an appendix to this report.

## Recordings

Articulous did not video or make audio recordings of these forums. Such recordings:

- inhibit some participants participating
- can make individuals a target in their own community if they present a dissenting opinion
- could compromise individual privacy.

A participant at the Coffs Harbour forum requested permission to record the session on behalf of stakeholders who were unable to attend. This request was agreed after a discussion with all participants. There were no objections raised.

# Queensland sessions

Articulous facilitated two Queensland forums in:

- Innisfail on Monday 13 October 2025
- Mareeba on Tuesday 14 October 2025.

Both sessions were well attended with between 80 and 100 participants attending both events. Some individuals who participated in the Innisfail forum travelled to participate in the Mareeba forum as well.

Articulous analysed the combined wall notes to identify the themes.

Key concerns raised included:

## **Incursion of disease pathogens and/or pests will impact the local banana industry**

- Farmers reported a range of threats of pathogens and pests, including Moko, Black Sigatoka, Banana Freckle, Panama (TR4), Bunchy Top, Fruit Fly and Weevils.
- Bananas and alternative crops are highly susceptible to disease. Farmers report it *“only takes a little bit of dirt”* to contaminate varied crops and wildlife.
- Queensland growers are committed to maintaining stringent biosecurity standards and reporting symptomatic crops. They reported previous incursions led to significant financial loss and had threatened their business viability.
- They said the Department and the Australian Government should be proactive in managing these future risks and their financial impact on farmers if banana importation was permitted.
- Farmers reported widespread crop disease in the Philippines. They were alarmed that local crops could be devastated if disease entered this country.
- Banana cultivators and growers typically take the form of small, multigenerational family businesses, who have built expertise over the long-term.
- On-farm suppliers (i.e. irrigation producers) and tissue cultivators are particularly vulnerable.
- Business closure or scale-back risks job loss for cultivators and growers, who *“may struggle to reskill elsewhere”*.
- This statement summarises their concerns, *“When we are all out of business, who is going to pick up the pieces and grow again?”*

## **Current debate is creating investment uncertainty**

- Machinery and on-farm maintenance costs are substantial (up to \$100K for a single piece of machinery) and can have a 10-year or longer payback period.
- Farmers said this assessment is creating investment uncertainty that makes it difficult to secure the support of financial institutions or provide assurance that loan repayments can be made.
- Previous periods of instability (i.e. 2008-09) saw reluctance to invest in long-term industry growth and development.

## **Potential impact on regional communities**

- Attendees said that unlike tobacco or orchard fruit, bananas can grow year-round. Consequently, they underpin sustainable, permanent regional populations.
- These permanent populations underpin cultural and economic activities in regional Queensland.
- Attending local Councillors and Mayors said a reduced banana industry would see seasonal workers replace permanent residents. This population would significantly impact local service businesses, sporting clubs and community cultural activities.

### **The banana industry has expertise that can assist this process, and farmers would like to see value-adding industry participation**

- Attendees said their industry has in-depth knowledge of banana culture, propagation and common pathogens. They said this knowledge is essential to assess risk.
- They added that the local industry had significant knowledge about farming systems that was also critical to risk assessment.
- They reported that field assessments and review activities should be informed by skilled entomologists, pathologists and farming practice experts.
- They said pathogen types can be difficult to visually distinguish, particularly by an untrained non-expert.
- They reported past efforts to contain pathogens to individual plantations have been successful, owing to local technical expertise.

### **The Philippines has widespread, endemic banana disease**

- One local respected tissue culture expert reported they had visited the Philippines and seen evidence of widespread disease.
- They reported numerous abandoned plantations as evidence of endemic disease.
- Others were concerned that pathogen and pest identification, monitoring and incursion protocols were less reliable and less stringent in the Philippines.
- They reported that while Formosana bananas may be tolerant to some disease, they were not definitively resistant.
- Attendees were concerned that new areas had been included in the scope of this review.
- They reported that Philippine farmers will cut down forest to establish new crops. They said while this new ground would be temporarily disease free, this would not endure.
- They said including new areas, "*cutting down additional jungle*" to relocate, reduced the imperative for local farmers to adopt strong biosecurity measures.

### **Transparency and good engagement are important**

- Banana cultivators and growers expect adequate time and opportunity to provide feedback or compile formal responses at each stage of the review process.
- Access to scientific modelling and technical decision-making frameworks is essential.
- Representation of industry growers with "*skin in the game*" should be assured throughout the process, including during field assessment.

# New South Wales sessions

Two forums were scheduled for New South Wales in:

- Murwillumbah on Wednesday 15 October 2025
- Coffs Harbour on Thursday 16 October 2025.

A small number of participants registered for the Murwillumbah session, however no stakeholders attended.

The Coffs Harbour session was well attended with between 50 and 60 participants.

Key concerns raised included:

## **Imports are unnecessary and any competition would be unfair**

- Many attendees asked why the Australian Government would consider the Philippines' request at all. Some suggested that an element of quid pro quo was involved and that banana imports were part of a broader geopolitical and trade agenda.
- Participants pointed out that domestic production was more than adequate to meet local demand for bananas. Allowing imports would not provide any significant benefit to Australian consumers.
- Concerns were also raised that labour practices and quality control measures in the Philippines did not meet Australian standards providing Philippine bananas with an unfair cost-base advantage.
- It was suggested the impact from this uneven competitive environment would force Australian growers out of the market leading to poorer outcomes for consumers in the long term.
- Participants firmly believed current arrangements were appropriate. A representative quote demonstrating this belief was *"we don't want any weakening of what we currently have"*.

## **Standards, practices and procedures in the Philippines**

- A number of stakeholders raised concerns that the Philippines does not meet the same high standard of procedural rigour for managing pests and disease.

## **Monitoring and compliance**

- A significant number of participants disagreed with the Australian Government's position that "low risk" should be the standard applied when considering imports. Many strongly suggested that only no risk was acceptable.
- Numerous stakeholders questioned whether audit and compliance procedures would be adequate if imports from the Philippines were to commence.
- Concerns were raised regarding the adequacy of the DAFF team being dispatched to the Philippines to undertake on-site information gathering. Some suggested the timing of the planned trip to the Philippines *"feels rushed"* and that it should be delayed. (NOTE: ABGC noted at this point that they had recommended a technical expert to DAFF and suggested DAFF consider adding this individual to the team visiting the Philippines.)
- A number of previous biosecurity breaches were raised. Concerns were expressed that this demonstrated that Australian controls may not be adequate to manage risks from Philippine imports. It was suggested that it didn't appear that these previous breaches had led to improvements in biosecurity procedures.
- Panama Disease was highlighted as especially difficult to detect with one participant noting *"the bananas look good on the outside, but the inside is all rotten"*.

## **Compensation and accountability**

- Questions were asked about whether compensation would be available to farmers in the event of a biosecurity incursion that led to losses.

- Participants also asked who is held accountable when a breach occurs. It was suggested that no one in government takes responsibility, but banana growers must bear the impacts. A representative quote of this sentiment was *“we don’t make decisions for tomorrow, we make decisions for our kids. I don’t want my kids to have this future.”*

# Western Australia session

A final session was held in Carnarvon on Wednesday 19 November 2025. It was attended by between 40 and 50 participants. Many of the most prominent concerns raised in Queensland and New South Wales were also put forward in Carnarvon including:

- The lack of demand for any additional supply of bananas in Australia.
- The appropriateness of 'very low risk' as the threshold for acceptance for mitigation measures.
- The severe impact of any biosecurity incursion on Australian growers.

Other key concerns raised are listed below. As stated previously these reflect the views expressed by stakeholders and were not substantiated by evidence during the session.

## Western Australia's unique position

- Participants raised Western Australia's domestic biosecurity status with regards to the rest of the mainland states and territories. Concerns were raised that banana imports from the Philippines may weaken internal biosecurity controls.
- A stakeholder pointed out the challenges that growers in Carnarvon already face and suggested any biosecurity incursion could threaten the local industry's existence.
- Stakeholders asked how closely the Commonwealth coordinated with state and territories, and whether or not any special conditions could be put in place for Western Australia.

## Compliance and assurance

- The Philippines would not comply—or would inadequately comply—with any risk mitigation measures required.
- Australia's audit and compliance regime would be inadequate.
- Australia's quarantine procedures—although strong—can be breached and that there is insufficient accountability when incursions occur.
- The costs of investigations and compliance will be borne by the Australian Government despite the request coming from the Philippines.

## Industry impacts

- Imports are unnecessary given domestic production adequately meets local demand.
- Industry will feel the full impact of any incursion with uncertain support from government.
- Even when financial support does become available it is distributed too slowly. One stakeholder suggested that a local reserve fund could be accessed quickly, but there would need to be firm assurances the Commonwealth would reimburse any outlays.