

OFFICIAL
AGRICULTURE, WATER AND THE ENVIRONMENT
QUESTION TIME BRIEF (QTB)
3-12 IMPORTED SEEDS

QUESTION: How is the government responding to reports of unsolicited seeds being sent to Australians in the mail?

KEY TALKING POINTS:

- The public is encouraged to report if they receive unsolicited seeds in the mail.
- Since gaining attention, the number of reports is increasing – to date there have been 46 confirmed reports.
- At our international mail centres, detector dogs, x-ray machines and biosecurity officers are in place to intercept any potential risk items that arrive.
- The recent reports are being mis-declared as jewellery, gifts, earrings, and garden tools and are deliberately concealed in foil to avoid x-ray detection.
- As a result, detector dogs are now being trained to lower the dogs' odour thresholds to be able to detect just 1 gram of seeds.
- The seeds have been found in mail arriving from China, Malaysia, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Taiwan.
- There is no such thing as zero biosecurity risk. Reports from the public and enforcement of our biosecurity laws are an integral part of our biosecurity system.
- The reports show the important role the public has in supporting our biosecurity system and reminds us that we all need to do our part to safeguard Australia from biosecurity pests and diseases.
- If anyone receives seeds in the mail from overseas, they must not plant the seeds or put them in the garbage.
- Secure the seeds and immediately report it online at awe.gov.au/report or by calling 1800 798 636.

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BACKGROUND AND CHRONOLOGY

The department regularly intercepts seeds at the border. In 2019, over 60 per cent of intercepted seeds were unidentified, meaning they could be an exotic, noxious or invasive species.

A number of seeds are permitted to be imported into Australia, information regarding which seeds may be brought into Australia is available on the Biosecurity Import Condition system on the department's website.

Since July 2020, there have been a number of reports by residents in the USA receiving unsolicited seed packets in the mail. This issue received a lot of media attention, and has since been reported in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Canada.

On 23 July 2020, Australia received its first report of unsolicited seeds from a citizen in South Australia. Since then an additional 45 reports have been made to the department. The issue has generated a number of media, public and stakeholder inquiries on this issue for the department and the minister. The department is also engaging with international stakeholders to keep informed on the issue.

The department issued a media release on 5 August 2020. Head of Biosecurity Operations, Emily Canning has since conducted several media interviews on the topic.

At our international mail centres, detector dogs, x-ray machines and biosecurity officers are in place to intercept any potential risk items that arrive. Detector dogs are also trained to detect seeds and training is currently underway to lowering the dogs' odour thresholds to be able to detect just 1 gram of seeds.

The department is currently undertaking a world first seed detection project using real-time video imagery, an auto-detection algorithm, and low-energy, high-resolution x-ray to detect the presence of seeds inside mail articles.

Lead Division

Contact: **Emily Canning**

Division: Biosecurity Operations Division

Date first prepared: 26 August 2020

Originating Source: MO

Phone: **0477 366 468**

Action Officer: **Jessica Mitchell**

Date last Updated: 27/08/2020 - 12:16 PM

AGRICULTURE, WATER AND THE ENVIRONMENT
QUESTION TIME BRIEF (QTB)
3-12 IMPORTED SEEDS

QUESTION: How is the government responding to reports of unsolicited seeds being sent to Australians in the mail?

KEY TALKING POINTS:

- The public is encouraged to report if they receive unsolicited seeds in the mail.
- Since gaining attention, the number of reports is increasing – to date there have been 87 confirmed reports.
- At our international mail centres, detector dogs, x-ray machines and biosecurity officers are in place to intercept any potential risk items that arrive.
- The recent reports are being mis-declared as jewellery, gifts, earrings, and garden tools and are deliberately concealed in foil to avoid x-ray detection.
- As a result, detector dogs are now being trained to lower the dogs' odour thresholds to be able to detect just 1 gram of seeds.
- The seeds have been found in mail arriving from China, Malaysia, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Taiwan and Vietnam.
- The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment is working with Australia Post to formally raise this issue through the Universal Postal Union.
- The department's agricultural counsellors are working with their international counterparts to gather a global understanding of the source countries and risk posed by the seeds.
- There is no such thing as zero biosecurity risk. Reports from the public and enforcement of our biosecurity laws are an integral part of our biosecurity system.
- Breaches of Australia's biosecurity conditions are subject to investigation and possible criminal prosecution.
- The reports reminds us that we all need to do our part to safeguard Australia from biosecurity pests and diseases.
- If anyone receives seeds in the mail from overseas, they must not plant the seeds or put them in the garbage.

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Seeds are often sent in the mail as a result of an e-commerce practice called 'brushing' to bolster their store's orders and ratings and to increase their visibility online.

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Lead Division

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