



September 2025

Webinar: Assessment of alternative measures for bananas from the Philippines - 17 September 2025

Webinar transcript

Dr Peter Finnin, First Assistant Secretary, Biosecurity Plant and Science Services Division.

Good afternoon.

So thanks everyone for taking some time to join us in our webinar today to discuss the announcement that we have made yesterday that the Department of Agriculture is about to commence an assessment of alternative measures in response to a request from the Philippines.

My name is Dr Peter Finnin. I'm the First Assistant Secretary for the Biosecurity, Plant and Science Services Division with the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. I'm joined by a number of my colleagues, but I did want to just take a moment just to quickly introduce two of my colleagues to you who are with me today. The first of those is Dr Allison Jones. So, Dr Allison Jones looks after our Plant Sciences and Risk Assessment team and it's her team of expert biosecurity scientists who will be undertaking this assessment of alternative measures. The other colleague I did just want to introduce to you was Dr Sarah Bruce. So Dr Sarah Bruce looks after our Plant Systems and Strategies team and in particular her team looks after our stakeholder engagement and is doing everything they can to make sure that you can hear from us and most importantly, that we can hear from you right throughout this process that we're about to engage on. So welcome Allison and Sarah.

So, we have some slides that will bring up on the screen and we'll walk through those slides. And if you're unfamiliar with the Microsoft Teams Live event functionality, there is a Q&A functionality. There will be an icon with a question mark and perhaps a Q&A somewhere at the top of your screen. Please do use that Q&A function to put any questions that you may have of us into that function. The team will be closely monitoring those questions. We've only got half an hour today but we will get through the presentation and we'll see if we can answer a few of the questions that you have. But we do make an absolute commitment to you all that we will as soon as practical after the end of the webinar publish on our website answers to all the questions that we received today. We will also send out an email to all of the email addresses that have been registered for attendance at today's webinar with those answers to those questions. So please do take the time if you've got questions to put them into the Q&A functionality. Thanks. Can we move to the next slide?

So, I'll just give you a brief outline of what we'll cover today. Firstly, we'll go over a little bit of the history of the request from the Philippines for import of bananas into Australia from the Philippines. We'll talk about the process that we will go through as we undertake the assessment. I will spend a little bit of time talking about why we would even engage in this request and we'll also then spend some time talking about what the next steps in the process will look like and how it is that we will continue to engage with you right throughout that process. As I've said, there's the Q&A function at the top of your screen. Please post your questions in there, the web address there is on the screen, and there's also some QR codes at the end of the presentation that you can use as well to access the website. We will put the recording of today's webinar up on our website if you want to review it at any point or equally if there are other people who want to know a bit more about what we're doing, you can direct them to the webinar recording. Thanks. Next slide.

So, some of the history of the application to export bananas from the Philippines to Australia. So, this has a long history, in fact a 30-year history because it was in 1995 that the Philippines first made a request of the Australian government to export Cavendish bananas to Australia. In the year 2000, the department commenced an import risk analysis for bananas from the Philippines. And then in 2002, the Philippines lodged a WTO dispute in relation to measures on horticultural products, including bananas. It's probably also important to point out that there were a number of other countries, including the EU, Ecuador, Chile and the United States, if I'm recalling correctly who also joined as parties to that dispute and registered that they also had a similar interest in that dispute. That dispute was accepted by the WTO, however because we were able to continue to engage in productive bilateral conversations with the Philippines that dispute has not been progressed any further under the WTO dispute resolution mechanisms. So, since 2002 we undertook a risk assessment process. That process was concluded in 2008 and then formally with a policy determination in 2009 which determined that the importation of bananas from the Philippines may be permitted provided the Philippines could demonstrate that they could meet the measures outlined in that import risk analysis. Since that time, the Philippines have not taken up the opportunity to export any bananas to Australia. In their view the measures that were proposed in 2008/9 are very stringent, very expensive and overly trade restrictive. Since that time, they have continued to talk to us about this and it is absolutely the Philippines number one highest priority trade market access request with Australia. It is something that they discuss at all levels of government whenever they engage with Australia whether that be with the Prime Minister or down to officials level. So, it remains an absolute priority for the Philippines that we engage with and consider their request. In 2018, they made a formal request that we consider alternative measures to those in the 2008 import risk analysis. Since that time, we've been doing some preliminary work on that, scoping out what that might look like. We do get many requests for market access to Australia and we only have limited resources to prioritise those requests, so we have not made any substantive work on that assessment. But we are at a point now where we think it's appropriate for us to engage in that more formal process and that's why we have made the announcement yesterday that we're undertaking this assessment of alternative measures. One other thing just to be aware of was that in March this year the Philippines did ask us as part of that process to also consider one additional banana Cavendish cultivar and one additional export province in the Philippines in the Davao de Oro and Formosana being the additional cultivar neither of which had been assessed in 2008. However, the additional cultivar and the additional region are both very similar to the cultivars previously assessed and adjacent to the regions that we previously assessed in 2008. Thanks, let's move to the next slide.

So, what will the assessment entail? What will we be doing? The first thing to say around this is that there is no predetermined outcome when it comes to this assessment. It will be a science and evidence-based assessment that is governed by the requirements of the Biosecurity Act and also guided by international standards. And to be absolutely clear, we will only agree to alternative measures if at the end of our assessment we are confident that any measures that we put in place or are put in place would achieve Australia's appropriate level of protection. So as far as what the assessment itself will be comprised of, essentially the request that we've had from the Philippines is they would like us to reassess the measures in relation to three particular pathogens, Moko, Black Sigatoka and banana freckle. So, we will do that. It has been 17 years since we concluded that assessment in 2008. There has been additional information that has become available so that that will be a good opportunity for us to reconsider all of that information and in particular take on board additional information that's come to light since 2008. Equally, as I said, 2008 is 17 years ago, the situation has changed. New pests and diseases are emerging which are relevant and which were not considered in 2008, so it gives us an opportunity to undertake a comprehensive review of all of the measures, all of the pest and diseases and to determine whether or not the measures that were proposed in 2008 even remain appropriate now. And then as I've already mentioned, the other element to that will be that consideration of that additional request, which is one additional cultivar and an additional export province. Thanks. Let's move to the next slide.

So, one of the questions that I'm sure you have is why would we, why would we consider the Philippines request? Again, it's important for us to recall and understand that we are reliant on being able to export our agricultural produce to the world. You may have seen the forecasts projecting over \$100 billion in agriculture production in 25/26, which is an extraordinarily great outcome for Australian agricultural industries. What comes with that is that we do need to export at least 70 percent of that produce to the world in order to get

the return on investment and so as part of that we are part of the world international trade system and as part of that we are also signatories to the World Trade Organisation and in particular to the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement. So, under those frameworks Australia has certain obligations because of those commitments, and that is that we should consider requests for market access from our trading partners, including requests for a consideration of alternative measures. If it's possible to develop import conditions to address any associated risks, they should be to what we consider, and it's up to us to decide what we consider is an appropriate level. But in doing so, any measures that we put in place need to be informed by scientific information and justification, and they shouldn't unreasonably restrict trade. However, if there are no measures, then we will not enable trade because we can't be confident that the risks can be managed. But it's within this international framework that we operate, and so we ask our trading partners to treat us the same that if we make reasonable requests that they should request them and that if they make determinations that they need to have measures in place to protect their own biosecurity that those measures be justified by the scientific evidence and that they should not unjustifiably restrict trade. As I've mentioned, there is a dormant WTO dispute that was lodged in 2002, it remains there and it could be reactivated should the Philippines be of the view that we are not living up to those international obligations and if that were to happen, then, and that dispute resolution process to ultimately come to pass, then the ultimate decisions around the measures that would apply to the import of bananas into Australia could be taken out of Australia's hands. And so, it's really important from my perspective that we remain firmly in control of this process and that we make the decision about any conditions and whether or not they can manage biosecurity risk. And so just to reiterate again, we will not compromise biosecurity to allow trade. We haven't predetermined an outcome. We will follow the evidence, and we will communicate with you all along that process to make sure you're informed at every step of the way. Thanks. Next slide.

So, from a practical perspective, what are the next steps? What are the next things that are going to occur? So, we've got two more webinars that we will host on Friday and on Monday. They will cover the same content so you're welcome to attend again, but it may get a little bit repetitive. But equally if you do want to attend and put further questions to us, then you can absolutely do that. However, for those of you in Innisfail, Mareeba, Murwillumbah and Coffs Harbour, we will be coming to see you in October. There is a QR code on the screen right now and that'll reappear towards the end of the presentation if you don't grab it now, but you can register by the Humanitix to any of those sessions. Equally there will be another webinar on the 23rd of October. Again, if you would like to attend or if you want to let other people know, that will be another opportunity. As far as the next practical step for the assessment, what that will be is a visit by our Departmental staff. They will include a tropical plant pathologist, some of our risk assessors and also our assurance and verification team who will head across to the Philippines. We're just working on arrangements, but we anticipate that will be late November, early December potentially to go and visit those banana growing regions and to go and see the Philippines banana production practices in person to get a good understanding of what that production system looks like so that can then inform the assessment process that will go from there. Once the team have returned from the Philippines will commence development of what we're calling an issues paper. The issues paper will go into more details to exactly what the assessment process would look like, some of the things that we will consider, and we will release that in the first half of 2026 and we will be pleased to receive any thoughts about that. But that will be part of us ensuring that we're keeping you all up to date on what it is we're intending to do and how that will work. The most important next major milestone will be to determine just to exactly when it will be, but I can tell you what it will be and that will be a draft report of the risk analysis that we'll undertake, an assessment of alternative measures and that will be released for a minimum of 60 days public consultation and we will come and meet with you directly through that period and would be very pleased to receive any and all feedback that you have on that. At the end of that public consultation period we will consider all the information we've received and then ultimately produce a final report which would be released and that would be the end point for the import risk analysis assessment of alternative measures process. And we might move to the next slide.

Beyond that? That's not the end, and even once we get to the end of that process, it doesn't mean that bananas would then be coming across the border. What that process would do would be to determine if there are measures that could possibly manage the risk. Only if we believe there are measures that can manage the risk would we then move to this step, which would be to work with the Philippines directly on how they are going to provide us with appropriate assurance that any bananas they export can meet those requirements

and only after thorough negotiation with the Philippines and the department being able to determine that we are able to practically, reasonably, appropriately verify that the things that need to be in place are in place and that there is a system for giving us that assurance would we then get to a point where we agree what we call an operational work plan, which would then be sort of the last step before moving to actual trade in bananas. But I want to reiterate again, firstly, there is no predetermined outcome. There is no trade about to occur imminently. We haven't yet determined whether or not there are indeed any measures that can manage the risk effectively. And even if we get to that determination, there needs to be thorough negotiation and we need to have confidence that the Philippines can implement the measures that they say they can. So, as I say, this process will take several years and we will keep talking to you right throughout that process. Next slide. Thanks.

So that's the last slide and we'll keep that up for the time being. We've got about 10 minutes or so of our allotted time left to us. But quickly just to walk you through what's on that slide there firstly, there's a QR code that will take you to our bananas from the Philippines web page that should be your go to site for all the up-to-date information on this process. It's got information that can give you more detail on the history, you can find a link there to the 2008 import risk analysis and we will keep that website regularly updated as we work through this process. The middle QR code there is the one that we saw earlier. So that's the QR code that'll take you to the Humanitix website where you can register to attend either one of the other webinars later this week or later in October or if you want to come and see us when we're up in Queensland and New South Wales you can also register for those events there through that QR code. The QR code on the right-hand side of the screen. I think it's your right, is another QR code that will take you to our subscription service. If you subscribe to that subscription service with your email address, you'll get automatic updates anytime that we make an update to our website, in particular the Bananas from the Philippines webpage. So, it's a really, really great mechanism for keeping you up to date of any changes to our website. And now the last thing just to point out there is an email address there please do use that if you've got any questions of us plantstakeholders@aff.gov.au, the team will be waiting to receive any feedback through that mailbox and and we will respond as soon as we are able. So, what I might do then? I've got some people helping me out in the background here and I'll just check with Rosanna to see if there's a question. Thanks, Rosanna.

So, the first question the team's asked me to answer and is why haven't you told us about this before now? So, we're making the announcement. We made the announcement yesterday with the release of the biosecurity advice notice because we've got to a point now in our preliminary assessment of the Philippines request that we think it's appropriate for us to start to engage more formally with that request from the Philippines, as I say we've been doing some preliminary work, but it's now been prioritised for direct assessment. And so, before we take any additional steps along that path, we felt it was really important to let you all know that this is the stage of the process that we're up to. It's the first stage. It's just the very first stage of the assessment. We have not done any of the detailed work. We've not done the detailed scientific analysis and the first practical step along that pathway is the visit to the Philippines later this year. Thanks, Rosanna. Hopefully that's answered the question. Is there another question?

So, the question is, will the DAFF tropical plant pathologist who is part of the tour have banana specific experience. And a second question, does DAFF have control over the field visit locations and itinerary to ensure representative sites are visited? So, when it comes to our tropical plant pathologist, absolutely, we have particularly identified someone who has very relevant experience working with bananas, banana diseases. Deliberately, because we want to make sure that we have our best experts going there into the field in the Philippines to get us the best assessment that we can. So absolutely our tropical plant pathologist does have knowledge of and experience with working with banana pests and diseases. I'm sorry, Rosanna, the second question was around the itinerary and locations. So yes, so we will be working very closely with BPI, I'm sorry I can't decode that acronym, but that's the Philippines equivalent of DAFF, on the visit. We have provided them with specific requirements as to what it is that we need to see. So, we will be working with them very much over where we're going and what we're doing. And to ensure that they are representative of the Philippines banana production systems. I think the other thing just to acknowledge but also to let you all know that we are absolutely aware of and look to be fair when the shoe is on the other foot, we do something similar. There's no doubt the Philippines will try and ensure that the places that we go to are at the higher end of the system, as we would do when we have countries coming out to look at

our systems, we certainly try and ensure that we have an opportunity to take them to the best and the brightest of Australia's producers as well, but we go in knowing that there may be some bias in the sample selection and the team who are going over are highly experienced and they are well aware of the potential for bias and they will be doing all of the good things which is making sure they're keeping an eye out as as they're driving through the region to try and understand that the places we're going are they particularly stand out compared to everything else or are they look like they're a reasonable representation of other things in the region and we won't just take the words of the people who are telling us, and I think that there's another opportunity there for those of you who may also have some experience in the Philippines to be providing us with information that you may have to make sure that we're not overlooking anything as we work through this process. I think we've probably got time for perhaps one more question.

So, the question I've got now is, why would you let the Philippines import bananas when we grow plenty of our own? And look, that's one of the real strengths of Australia and I certainly as a young fellow was a constant consumer of bananas and my 2 girls are also regular consumers of really great quality Australian grown bananas. And again, just to reiterate one more time, there is no predetermined outcome here. We are not about to let the Philippines import bananas anytime soon. We are working through this process. Why are we working through this process? Why would we engage with this process? We are signatories to the World Trade Organisation. We have signed up to the SPS agreement, the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement. As part of those we have committed ourselves to certain obligations which are around treating with our trading partners as we expect them to treat with us, to use and abide by the international standards and guidance when it comes to doing risk assessment. And as I've said, we are a major exporting nation. We're producing \$100 billion worth of agriculture produce this year. And about \$70 billion of that will be exported to the world and we need to be able to demonstrate to the world that we are a trustworthy trading partner who uses the international trade rules and frameworks in a sensible way, that we engage with them appropriately, reasonably and that if a trading partner asks us a reasonable request, that we reasonably consider it. But it does not mean that just because they ask, we say yes. We only say yes, if we have absolute confidence that the biosecurity risks can be managed. We've just got 3 minutes left, according to my clock, so do we want to, is there just one last question, there is OK. Thanks, Rosanna.

So, one last question I have here is just will imported bananas have to meet all the same standards Australian grown ones need to? So absolutely. So, this is the case for any imported food. The Food Standards Australian New Zealand, FSANZ, is the Authority here in Australia that sets all of our food standards and any food produced in Australia or consumed in Australia must meet those food standards and so when it comes to any imported food, there is the Imported Food Act. I may have got the name of the act slightly wrong. But the Department of Agriculture, a separate part of the department, administers that and are responsible for ensuring that any imported food is complying with all of those standards under the FSANZ framework and all of the requirements under the Imported Food Act. Absolutely any imported food, including if we get there, any imported bananas would need to meet all the same standards when it comes to food safety that Australian grown bananas need to meet.

So, look, thank you very much for your time today. As I say we will repeat the webinar on Friday. As I say, you're very welcome to attend again, but the content will be essentially similar to what we've presented today. But if there are others that you know would like the opportunity to hear the presentation and or put any questions to us, please let them know. The QR codes are still on the screen if you want to use those. Otherwise, I think information has been put in the chat for you to grab it out of there as well. Don't forget to continue to check into our Bananas from the Philippines webpage. The recording of today's webinar will be placed on there shortly and as I've said, we've made a firm commitment to you all that we will answer all your questions, so we will post them on our website. But if you've registered via an e-mail address today, look out for an email in the next day or so where we will send back to you all the answers to the questions that we've received today. So, thank you once again, really appreciate your time. We'll see you very soon if you're coming to see us in Innisfail or Mareeba, Murwillumbah or Coffs. Bye.