

Northern Territory Government Submission – National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement Review

Summary

The Northern Territory Government (NTG) remains in broad agreement with the NEBRA and its governance and management arrangements. The issues most relevant to the NT arise from the NT's status as a very small Jurisdiction, with very large land area and a very small, sparse population.

The NT is at a high risk of biosecurity incursions due to its proximity to Asia and to increasing overseas visitation and trade, together with occasional illegal arrivals. The problems are compounded by a long, remote coastline and a very sparse remote population. The NT's unique situation presents challenges in meeting current NEBRA obligations particularly in relation to preparedness, initial delivery of response activities, and information sharing and reporting.

The NTG recommends against extending the scope of the NEBRA to include containment. The NTG would support the development of a separate deed-like arrangement specifically for containment of important environmental pests and diseases (for example RIFA), and suggests that this should be investigated. However, any such arrangement would require an alternative mechanism for funding that captures beneficiaries across the whole community. It is critical that containment activities do not decrease efforts or funding for eradication of pests. The NTG does not see any benefit in including transition to management under the NEBRA

The NTG generally agrees that the roles and responsibilities outlined in the NEBRA are clear and appropriate, but suggests that there is scope for the Commonwealth to take a more active role in planning, coordinating and leading on-ground responses.

The NTG considers that it is important that decision making is linked to funding; only funding bodies should have decision-making authority. The NTG is open to the possibility of a body similar to Animal Health Australia or Plant Health Australia, including membership of non-government organisations that contribute both to funding and to decision making.

In response to the difficulties faced by small jurisdictions, the NTG recommends that the Australian Government through a formal MOU between Northern Australian Quarantine Strategy and NTG supports the NT to meet its biosecurity obligations.

Information sharing between jurisdictions is generally effective but information sharing with the public and with non-government organisations needs improvement.

Smaller jurisdictions would be assisted also by a greater Commonwealth role in planning, coordinating and leading responses and in this light the performance, availability and roles of both Commonwealth expert teams and cross-jurisdictional rapid response teams should be reviewed.

The NTG is satisfied that the current NEBRA cost sharing arrangements are appropriate and equitable.

General

The Northern Territory Government (NTG) remains in broad agreement with the NEBRA and its governance and management arrangements. The issues most relevant to the NT arise, not surprisingly, from the NT's status as a very small jurisdiction. While the NT is the third largest Australian jurisdiction by area, covering nearly one sixth of the country, the population is less than 250,000.

The NT is at a high risk of biosecurity incursions due to its proximity to Asia and to increasing overseas visitation and trade, together with occasional illegal arrivals. The problems are compounded by a long, remote coastline and a very sparse remote population. The NT's unique situation presents challenges in meeting current NEBRA obligations particularly in relation to preparedness, initial delivery of response activities, and information sharing and reporting. This problem is exacerbated when simultaneously conducting an existing response. The NTG draws attention to the potential reciprocal benefits of funding the involvement of remote Aboriginal communities in biosecurity response activities.

As with other small jurisdictions, lack of resources is a primary issue. In the early stages of an incursion the NT might struggle to find staff, and in some cases the expertise to collect appropriate data, and to conduct risk analyses and benefit-cost analyses. The problem is exacerbated in situations in which biosecurity responses are already under way, as they are currently. A small pool of available staff also presents challenges in completing the documentation required to evaluate and initiate a NEBRA response while simultaneously conducting initial response activities.

Given the challenges that the NT faces as a small dispersed jurisdiction and the current policy priorities at National and NT level it would be worthwhile considering as part of review the role of local Aboriginal people and organisations in supporting the objectives of the agreement. In particular, utilisation of traditional owners' expertise and knowledge of land to monitor ecosystems, report change and disseminate information would add considerable value to the project. Specific funding to support capacity in this area and enable a two way exchange that is culturally appropriate would assist in delivering on the biosecurity agenda, support Aboriginal people's obligations to look after country, recognise their economic participation and build on strengths in the community.

While the NT is currently free of many pests and weeds present in other states, these internal threats that are not covered by the NEBRA present as great or greater risk to the NT than many potential exotic threats. Responding to incursions of organisms from elsewhere in Australia is a high and essential priority and limits the availability of sparse resources. Examples include parthenium, water hyacinth, sagittaria, pond apple and rubbervine, all of which are currently either eradicated or provisionally eradicated in the NT.

Purpose

The NTG supports the NEBRA as the appropriate mechanism for its purpose, and agrees that the responses conducted so far are appropriate and reflect its purpose and help to achieve its outcomes.

The NTG recommends against extending the scope of the NEBRA to include containment. Jurisdictions are more likely to support the NEBRA if all responses have a clear endpoint (eradication).

The NTG would support the development of a separate deed-like arrangement specifically for containment of important environmental pests and diseases (for example RIFA), and suggests that this should be investigated. This approach reflects the concerns of environmental agencies with containing pests and diseases with long term environmental or social amenity impacts, and recognises that governments are most likely liable for long term containment of these incursions. Such an arrangement would be likely to be activated frequently and would require an alternative mechanism for funding that captures beneficiaries across the whole community.

It is critical, however, that any arrangement for containment activities does not decrease efforts of funding injection for eradication of pests. Indeed, the NEBRA would benefit from the inclusion of any mechanism that actively encourages or incentivises more rapid eradication so as to reduce the need for containment programs.

The NTG favours keeping weeds within the scope of the NEBRA, at least until such time as the development of a separate deed is confirmed and imminent.

Roles and responsibilities

The NTG generally agrees that the roles and responsibilities outlined in the NEBRA are clear and appropriate.

There is scope for the Commonwealth to take a more active role in both coordinating and leading on-ground responses. This would be particularly beneficial where incursions occur in the smaller jurisdictions with lower resource and capacity levels, but the benefits would not be limited to those jurisdictions.

Both current NEBRA roles and responsibilities, and possible increased Commonwealth involvement in responses, appear to be generally consistent with Commonwealth and NT legislation.

The NT does not have single biosecurity legislation, which might add a layer of complexity to the administration of responses. In general, NT legislation is consistent with the NEBRA and can accommodate all NEBRA responsibilities. For weeds, proposed legislative changes accommodate all NEBRA responsibilities.

Decision making and governance

It is important that decision making is linked to funding. This does not mean that authority should be proportional to funding, but rather that only funding bodies should have decision-making authority. The NTG is open to the possibility of a body similar to Animal Health Australia or Plant Health Australia, including membership of non-government organisations that contribute both to funding and to decision making.

Experience of NTG representatives during involvement in existing responses indicates that certain jurisdictions questioned the representation of the Consultative Committee and therefore their capability to make recommendations. There is a need to resolve any such issues at the outset, therefore preventing such discussions from being required at crucial decision making times. This might include confirmation of sign off of appointments at the appropriate level.

Delivery of response activities.

Delivery of responses is particularly difficult for small jurisdictions. This is especially so during the period before the final decision on approving a national response, when staff and resources are required to take immediate on-ground action in response to an incursion while simultaneously conducting pre-response activities and preparing documentation for a NEBRA response. For small jurisdictions gaining adequate data to fulfil the requirement to assess feasibility of eradication presents particular difficulties due to comparatively low personnel and expertise levels. Difficulties in preparing for a new response are exacerbated when staff are already conducting an existing response.

This problem could be addressed in part by making available contingency funding, or staged funding to assist smaller jurisdictions in preparing for responses and conducting pre-response activities.

NTG notes that the ACT is recognised as being supported by NSW government and recommends that the Australian Government through a formal MOU between Northern Australian Quarantine Strategy and NTG supports the NT to meet its biosecurity obligations.

An MOU with the Commonwealth is also supported by the reality that a large part of the Northern Territory's most precious and susceptible environmental assets are under Commonwealth control.

The performance, availability and roles of both Commonwealth expert teams and cross-jurisdictional rapid response teams should be reviewed. The services of these teams have been in the past either not always available or not always effective. There is a role for these teams in assisting jurisdictions to plan preparations before incursions occur.

Smaller jurisdictions would be assisted also by a greater Commonwealth role in both coordinating and leading responses.

Information sharing.

Information sharing between jurisdictions is generally effective but could be improved during the early stages of incursions.

Information sharing with the public and with non-government organisations needs improvement, both for raising awareness of the NEBRA and for improving the transparency of arrangements.

All stakeholders, including government, would benefit from greater dissemination of information around the reasons for not initiating NEBRA responses for particular species or incursions.

Improved dissemination on successful biosecurity responses would improve public awareness of biosecurity issues and the NEBRA roles and responsibilities of jurisdictions. This process could be assisted if a National Biosecurity Officer were to be established under the IGAB, and specifically assigned a role in promotion of information sharing.

Preparedness

The NTG agrees that sharing training and resources would help preparedness. The roles of rapid response teams could be reviewed to include a greater focus on increasing information sharing and up-skilling other jurisdictions in preparation for future responses. Running exercises would contribute to this process but would be a heavy burden on the resources of small jurisdictions.

As discussed under 'Delivery of response activities' above preparedness presents difficulties for small jurisdictions where staff numbers, and expertise levels in some areas, can be comparatively low.

While recognising that lists of priority pests and diseases could not and should not try to be exhaustive, such lists would have a number of uses. Lists could be used to prepare contingency plans and would be useful to help raise public understanding and awareness of biosecurity issues. Lists of organisms judged not to meet NEBRA criteria would also be useful to assist decision making and resource allocation.

Funding arrangements

The NTG is satisfied that the current NEBRA cost sharing arrangements are appropriate and equitable.

Managing the NEBRA

The NTG does see any benefit in including transition to management under the NEBRA, as it would weaken the current support that it gains from a focus on eradication.