

## **E-bulletin for ABGC Members - 23 October 2020**

### **Advocating for banana growers at the Queensland election**

The Australian Banana Growers' Council, on behalf of members formally delivered a range of policy proposals on 25 September to relevant Queensland Ministers, Shadow Ministers and politicians in key seats.

The proposals recognise this industry as the largest horticultural contributor to the state's economy and an essential part of many Far North Queensland communities.

In our correspondence, ABGC chair Stephen Lowe outlined three key issues:

- Access to staff
- Panama Tropical Race 4 (TR4)
- Great Barrier Reef Water Quality

A summary of the ABGC policy requests of the newly elected or re-elected Queensland Government area as follows.

#### **Access to staff**

A current major issue for the Banana Industry's is the lack of available farm staff, due to visa holders, both backpackers and Pacific Islanders, going home and not generally being replaced by either foreign workers or Australians. This issue is both urgent and longer term.

- Continuation of SWP/PLS pilot

Prior to the current caretaker period the Queensland Government authorised a pilot trial of four flights, from low risk COVID-19, Pacific Island countries, for the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) and Seasonal Worker Program (SWP).

PLS and SWP workers are essential to help growers meet some of the anticipated shortage of at least 7000 workers, over the next six months, in the Queensland horticulture sector alone. Unfortunately, the farm worker demand and supply equation is going to get worse.

*The ABGC requests a government commitment to support the continuation of both the SWP and PLS, following the current pilot.*

- Regional Investment in Infrastructure

Significant planning and investment is required to support the agricultural workforce in the Far North. Infrastructure and particularly worker accommodation, is critical. The provision of these services is beyond the capacity of industry and requires government support.

*ABGC requests Queensland Government to invest in Far North Queensland to assist farmers to attract and maintain workers. Such assistance would include subsidised*

*accommodation and transport, a marketing campaign and the construction of permanent worker accommodation.*

## **Panama TR4**

TR4 has the potential to destroy the banana industry, with major implications for the economy and jobs.

- Continuation of Shared Responsibility for TR4 Biosecurity

ABGC (on behalf of industry) and the Queensland Government have signed a Cost Sharing Deed to co-fund the TR4 Program until June 2023. After June 2023, ABGC will lead the TR4 Program, designed to continue to control and contain the disease.

It is important that Government assistance be available to industry after June 2023, via both in-kind support, e.g. for compliance and diagnostics, and via contingency funding, should there be future detections of TR4 in production areas outside the Tully Valley.

*ABGC requests a commitment from Government to support an industry-led TR4 Program beyond June 2023.*

- Frontline DAF staff for TR4

The banana industry has invested matched levy funds, through Hort Innovation, for a number of research and development projects in regard to TR4, that are delivered by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF). However, the current Government cap on the numbers of staff in DAF, including those not funded by DAF has the potential to erode the success of these projects.

*ABGC requests the current cap on front-line DAF staff be lifted.*

- Feral Pig Initiative to Control TR4

Over the last three years, the banana industry has been responsible for more than 90 per cent of pigs destroyed in the Tully region, using ABGC and grower funds. ABGC's aerial shooting program has been particularly effective and efficient. This despite ABGC receiving about 10% of the Government feral pig funding that was specifically designed to manage pigs in the current TR4 zone.

*ABGC requests a commitment to be provided with \$150,000 per year to control feral pigs from spreading TR4, from June 2021.*

- Trespass and TR4

ABGC notes that trespass for the animal-related industries was included under the Biosecurity Regulation 2016, as an offence, but that the regulatory amendment did not include plant industries.

A biosecurity breach by a trespasser could potentially devastate this industry, by spreading Panama TR4.

*ABGC requests Plant Industries to be covered for trespass under the Biosecurity Regulation.*

## **Great Barrier Reef Water Quality**

The Banana Industry is proud of its environmental achievements.

- **Additional Regulation on New Cropping Development**

The ABGC has worked with the Queensland Government on the Agricultural Environmentally Relevant Activity standard for banana cultivation. This legislation has now been enacted and banana growers in the Wet Tropics are now required to comply with water quality regulations.

The current Government plan is to have additional regulation on land that has not grown crops in the last ten years. The ABGC does not support this and believes the additional regulation is an unnecessary cost for growers. There is no evidence that additional water quality benefits will result from the proposed additional regulation.

*ABGC requests that the Queensland Government end its plans to create additional regulation on the development of land that does not have a history of cropping.*

- **Major integrated Project (MIP)**

The Wet Tropics MIP is to cease in June 2021. The MIP is delivering key outcomes for improving water quality in the Johnstone and Tully catchments because it connects multiple elements of catchment and water quality improvement to deliver an integrated, whole-of-basin effort.

*ABGC requests continued investment in a place-based water quality project, such as the Wet Tropics Major Integrated Project, to build on the outcomes achieved over the last the years.*

Members wanting to see responses received to ABGC's correspondence could contact CEO, Jim Pekin via email on [jim.pekin@abgc.org.au](mailto:jim.pekin@abgc.org.au) or phone: 07 3278 4786.