Subcommittee on Plant Health Diagnostic Standards – Meeting 17 – Communiqué

The Subcommittee on Plant Health Diagnostic Standards (SPHDS) provides advice, and acts on requests from the Plant Health Committee (PHC) relating to plant biosecurity diagnostics. Representation includes the Australian, state and territory governments, Plant Health Australia, Plant Biosecurity CRC, CSIRO and the New Zealand Ministry of Primary Industries. It aims to sustain and improve the quality and reliability of plant pest diagnostics in Australia. SPHDS progressed this work at its 17th meeting, held in Brisbane on the 16th and 17th of October 2013 at the Queensland Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry offices.

The committee continued implementing the recommendations and actions of the National Plant Biosecurity Diagnostic Strategy (NPBDS), which aligns to the National Plant Biosecurity Strategy and the Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity (IGAB). Key themes of the NPBDS are the development of diagnostic capability to identify High Priority Pests, the National Plant Biosecurity Diagnostic Network (NPBDN), implementing quality management systems, and facilitating the development of relevant national information systems that support diagnostics. Details of the specific issues considered by the committee at the meeting are below.

The next scheduled in person meeting of SPHDS is May 2014 in Melbourne.

Further information about SPHDS and its activities can be found at the NPBDN website, contacting your local SPHDS representative or through the SPHDS Executive Officer at sphds@daff.gov.au.

Member and related committee reports

Members, observers, the Subcommittee on National Plant Health Surveillance, and other groups and committees operating in the plant diagnostic arena, provided overviews of their activities undertaken since the previous meeting. Members discussed diagnostic related activities occurring across the country. In addition, members noted a range of international diagnostic activities from the International Plant Protection Convention, the ASEAN diagnostic network and Plant Health Quads[1].

Of note, Victorian Department of Environment and Primary Industries staff have completed their move to the AgriBio facility at La Trobe, which is now the main plant biosecurity diagnostics facility in the state.

Working group activities

Four working groups deliver specific aspects of SPHDS activities, with each consisting of SPHDS members and technical advisors. Working groups meet at each SPHDS meeting and report key outcomes back to the wider group.

Diagnostic Standards Working Group (DSWG)

DSWG progressed the development of National Diagnostic Protocols (NDPs), finalising the Huanglongbing (HLB) protocol for submission to PHC, together with assessing peer review and verification reports for a further 11 draft protocols. Building on the strength of the NDPs, which focus on definitive identification of a pest or group of pests, DSWG also agreed to work with the Department of Agriculture to generate guidelines for developing generic (multi-taxa) protocols. This will lead to consistent and high quality generic protocols that meets the biosecurity need of the NPBDN, particularly Post Entry Quarantine facilities.

[1] Plant Health Quadrilaterals is an international partnership in which senior regulators from the national plant protection organisations of Australia, Canada, NZ and USA may engage in collaborative projects and discussions of plant health issues of mutual concern

DSWG facilitated a protocol stocktake on the NPBDN website that lists available diagnostic resources, including draft NDPs and international protocols for Australia's High Priority Pests. Contact the SPHDS Executive Officer SPHDS@daff.gov.au for access to draft NDPs.

Accreditation, Expertise and Resources Working Group (AERWG)

The AERWG is overseeing the final stages of Round 2 of the national proficiency testing program and begun preparations for Round 3 in 2014.

Network Implementation Working Group (NIWG)

The NIWG finalised the overarching governance arrangements for the NPBDN, which will be presented to PHC in November for endorsement. The NIWG also reviewed the network website that supports communication between, and provides tools for, NPBDN members. The group considered the Laboratory Residential Program and the Annual Diagnosticians' Workshop in conjunction with the Professional Development Working Group (PDWG), as described below.

Professional Development Working Group

SPHDS intends to run the Annual Diagnosticians' Workshop 2014 in Melbourne early in the new year. The structure of the workshop was reviewed to deliver updates on NPBDN activities, review of keys issues for diagnosticians and to provide a fundamental training opportunity, this year focussing on bioinformatics. Further, NPBDN training activities were prioritised to match member needs, highlighting the continuation of the Laboratory Residential Program and the bacteriology mentoring projects as valuable events for 2014.

PLANTPLAN supporting documents

PLANTPLAN, the nationally agreed technical response plan for an Emergency Plant Pest incident (www.planthealthaustralia.com.au/plantplan), is currently under review. As part of the process, SPHDS has agreed to be an expert reference group for the supporting documentation produced from the current PLANTPLAN appendix relating to diagnostics (Collection procedures and protocols for transport, diagnosis and confirmation of EPP's). SPHDS work with Plant Health Australia to review and maintain the documents to ensure they align with best practice for diagnostics in an emergency response.

Network capability needs

The committee discussed current and future approaches to capture NPBDN capability data and mechanisms to address identified capability gaps. The meeting considered the capability audits conducted under the Plant Pathology and Entomology Study 2012, and Plant Biosecurity Research, Development and Extension Strategy. In the short term, SPHDS decided to continue to address NPBDN capability needs through communication with other committees and working groups on specific issues, liaising with professional societies in relation to building capacity, and facilitating professional development activities to NPBDN members based on identified priorities and capability gaps.

Reference collections and the Australian Plant Pest Database

SPHDS discussed approaches to securing the future of reference collections and the information systems that support them, such as the Australian Plant Pest Database (APPD). These frequently underpin plant biosecurity decisions and are an essential part of the NPBDN. SPHDS has an active governance role in APPD, and is developing strategic approaches to ensure the long-term viability of the reference collections.

Postgraduate Plant Biosecurity Program

SPHDS noted that the postgraduate degrees (Certificate, Diploma and Masters) in plant biosecurity are now open for 2014 enrolments. Information on these qualifications is available at www.plantbiosecurity.edu.au.

Presentations

SPHDS received presentations relevant to the information systems that support the NPBDN. John La Salle, Director of the Atlas of Living Australia (ALA) provided an overview of recent activities of the ALA. Gary Kong (PBCRC) presented the latest digital resources on offer from the PBCRC. In particular, Gary focussed on CheckPoint a software package aimed at assisting the plant biosecurity community communicate and capture diagnostic activity.