

Aspects of Plant Quarantine in the South Pacific Islands*

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During a recent survey of plant quarantine legislation and practice in the area of the South Pacific Commission, visits were made to Papua and New Guinea, the British Solomon Islands, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, Eastern and Western Samoa, and French Polynesia, and enquiries in other territories were conducted by correspondence. As a result of the survey, a general picture of the status of plant quarantine in the South Pacific was obtained.

In 1951 the South Pacific Commission convened a Plant and Animal Quarantine Conference in Suva, which was attended by representatives of territories within the Commission's area and by experts from metropolitan countries. The recommendations made by the Conference provide a sound basis for improvement in the practice of plant and animal quarantine. The F.A.O. Plant Protection Committee for the South East Asia and Pacific Region holds regular meetings, the objective being to protect the Region as a whole from the introduction of serious pests and diseases of major crops. The Committee has sponsored a Plant Protection Agreement to which most of the territories in the South Pacific have adhered. Thus it is evident that F.A.O. and the South Pacific Commission are aware of the dangers which threaten agriculture in the South Pacific area, and are making efforts to stimulate appropriate action by territories within the area.

Agriculture occupies a position of dominant importance in the economy of the area, though the range of economic crops is limited. The establishment of one serious pest or disease of a major crop may have drastic effects on the economy of a territory, as underdeveloped territories do not have the technical staff and equipment to attempt eradication of a new pest or disease which might gain a foothold. For example, *Brontispa longissima* which was presumably introduced into Tahiti from New Caledonia, was first observed in Papeete toward the end of 1960. A few months later, though the known infested area was only a few square kilometres, all efforts at eradication were abandoned. Hence French Polynesia is now faced with the prospect of considerable financial outlay on control measures and a gradual spread of the pest throughout the coconut groves of Tahiti and other islands of the group. It is always difficult to persuade Pacific islanders to implement artificial control measures, so the prognosis is that

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more damage will be done to coconuts than would be the case in a more advanced community. The inescapable conclusion is that plant quarantine enforcement is of particular importance in the South Pacific area.

Directors of Agricultural Departments in the area are undoubtedly aware of the importance of plant quarantine, and the recommendations of the South Pacific Commission's Plant and Animal Quarantine Conference and of the F.A.O. Plant Protection Committee for the South East Asia and Pacific Region have produced appropriate action in certain directions. However, directors apparently consider that no senior staff appointments are necessary in the field of plant quarantine. In my opinion, the lack of such appointments is the prime cause of the manifold shortcomings in plant quarantine practice in the South Pacific Islands.

In the whole of the South Pacific islands there is not a single professional plant quarantine officer. In departments which have entomologists or plant pathologists on the staff, these officers are consulted when difficulties arise and when revision of legislation becomes necessary. The primary duty and interest of such officers, however, is the control of existing pests and diseases of economic crops.

What is required in each Department of Agriculture is a professional officer whose sole, or at least primary function is to ensure that plant quarantine legislation and practice are maintained at a high standard. Such an officer would need to be a graduate who had received special training in the theory and practice of plant quarantine. In territories where the Department has a very small staff it might be possible to train an officer in plant quarantine and assign him other duties as well as those of plant quarantine. The latter, however, should be his primary responsibility. Where there is no Veterinary staff, one officer could perhaps function as Plant and Animal Quarantine Officer.

Two objections have commonly been raised against the proposal to appoint a professional plant quarantine officer. These are that there would be insufficient work to occupy an officer's full time and that the expense involved in such an appointment would be excessive. Regarding the claim of insufficient work, it should be noted that the officer's duties would include the recruitment and training of Inspectors, ensuring that plant quarantine legislation and practice are kept up to date and efficient, and that there is adequate provision and proper use of physical facilities such as fumigation chambers and incinerators, compiling information regarding exotic pests and diseases which could threaten his territory, educating the public regarding the importance of plant quarantine procedures, maintaining contact with importers, shipping firms and airlines, and ensuring liaison and co-operation with plant quarantine services overseas. As for the expense involved, if the appointment of a plant quarantine officer should lead to the exclusion of even one major pest or disease of an important crop, all the expenditure connected with his appointment would be more than adequately covered in perpetuity.

In the field of plant quarantine practice, an aspect which has caused me some concern is the method of handling the baggage of incoming passengers, especially those from tropical islands within the South Pacific area. A passenger who is unaware that there are restrictions on the importation of plants may make a journey between certain island groups without being asked if he is carrying plants and without having his baggage inspected. The International Passengers' Baggage Declaration does not mention plants, and often the passenger is not asked at the terminal port or airport if he has plants in his possession.

Indeed language difficulties sometimes make interrogation impossible. Airlines and air terminals in particular are making continual efforts to reduce the number and intricacy of forms with which a traveller is required to cope, and declarations of various kinds tend to be discarded. Recently, for instance, Fiji has dispensed with a Passengers' Baggage Declaration. Instead the incoming passenger is asked by the Customs officer to read a card printed in various languages, on which he is asked, among other things, to declare plants in his possession.

In the author's opinion, the various methods of asking a passenger whether he is carrying plants may be grouped in the following descending order of efficiency:

- 1) A separate form, given to the passenger in transit, asking a simple question regarding plants, and requiring a simple reply.
- 2) A question on the Passengers' Baggage Declaration, which is also completed in transit.
- 3) A verbal question asked by a Customs officer or plant quarantine Inspector at the terminal building.
- 4) Asking the passenger to read a printed card, presented to him by a Customs officer at the terminal building, on which questions including one relating to plants require an answer.

The procedure described under (1) allows no misunderstanding, and gives the passenger time to think of the possible consequences of a false declaration. The time required to complete the form is negligible. Procedure (2) is adequate, though experience shows that impatient passengers, when confronted with a long series of questions, tend to answer them all in the negative. Both of these procedures allow time for passengers who speak a language not included in the form to obtain the assistance of the crew and of other passengers. Procedure (3) involves language difficulties. Moreover, a passenger, when unexpectedly asked whether he is carrying plants, would probably be more likely to give a false answer than would be the case if he had time to think. Procedure (4) also involves language difficulties, if the passenger's language is not on the card. Also, a hasty reading of the card under the eye of a Customs officer could lead to the passenger's missing the question concerning plants.

Regarding the inspection of the baggage of incoming passengers, the present position is unsatisfactory. The general practice appears to be a casual check on baggage by a Customs officer, often in the absence of a plant quarantine Inspector. Polynesian peoples seem to be in the habit of carrying plants, and are often

ignorant of restrictions imposed on plant importation. Enthusiastic gardeners and agriculturalists of other races also are sometimes liable to attempt the smuggling of plants. It would appear that a one hundred percent inspection of baggage from tropical islands would be a wise precaution. In most cases this could be implemented with little or no increase in inspectorial staff, because there is not a great volume of traffic between the islands.

Turning again to plant quarantine legislation, there is the question of whether it is better to provide wide general powers or to include a good deal of detail. Opinions differ on this subject, but it is suggested that, in the case of territories which have only small Departments of Agriculture, a certain minimum of detail is advisable. Long-established Departments with large numbers of trained and experienced personnel can doubtless carry on plant quarantine enforcement efficiently in the absence of detailed legislation. This is because an officer who retires or is absent can be replaced by another of long experience and adequate knowledge. In small Departments, however, where only one or two persons are familiar with the operation of plant quarantine, retirements, transfers or absences on leave can create a situation in which no officer familiar with plant quarantine remains. Hence it is as well to have a body of quarantine law which will act as a guide to those who have to administer it. Another advantage of sufficient detail is that it serves to enlighten importers as to the requirements of the law.

Post-entry quarantine is a technique which is not generally practised in the South Pacific Islands, though in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea all plants imported from countries other than Australia are grown under quarantine. In some other territories, plants of economic importance, imported by Departments of Agriculture, are grown under quarantine, and in some cases have been subjected to pre-entry quarantine. In general, however, if a plant has been legally imported and is apparently free from pests and diseases the importer is permitted to take unrestricted possession of the imported material. Because post-entry quarantine is generally disregarded, it follows that the quantity of imported propagative material is not closely controlled. A beneficial indirect result of the practice of post-entry quarantine is that it discourages importation of plants which the importer has no very cogent reason to introduce. If he knows that only a restricted quantity may be imported, and that it will be subject to post-entry quarantine, he is less likely to make unnecessary introductions. Since quarantine authorities in the more advanced countries are convinced of the value of post-entry quarantine, territories in the South Pacific areas would be well advised to follow their lead.

Future progress in plant quarantine practice in the area will of course depend primarily on the willingness of territorial Administrations to provide funds for the provision of adequate staff and their training, and for the necessary physical facilities. It is unfortunately difficult to persuade administrators to spend considerable sums on an organization of which the function is to prevent hypothetical invasions by pests and diseases, and which can give no guarantee of such preven-

tion. Their attitude is different when there is a clear and present danger, as may be seen in Fiji, where £400,000 have been spent during the past eight years in an effort to restrict the spread of the coconut rhinoceros beetle. International bodies such as the South Pacific Commission and the F.A.O. Plant Protection Committee for the South East Asia and Pacific Region can play a valuable part in influencing the policy of territorial Administrations, and they have in fact accomplished some important work. It is through agencies such as these that interterritorial consultation and co-operation are possible, and such consultation and co-operation are highly desirable for the improvement of the practice of plant quarantine in the South Pacific Islands.

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