

Future proofing aquatic biosecurity: Consistency is urgently needed for Australia's ALOP for prawns

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White spot syndrome virus (WSSV) emerged from China in 1992 causing the OIE listed White Spot Disease in crustaceans. WSSV was exotic to Australia until 2016, when a WSD incursion caused total loss of production in prawn farms along the Logan River (SE QLD) for 2 growing seasons, followed by ongoing production losses of 44-65% thereafter. Wild prawns and crabs are also dying of WSD, and crustacean fisheries were severely impacted by restrictions imposed in the Moreton Bay biosecurity zone to try to prevent domestic spread of WSSV into other regions. These biosecurity restrictions for all prawn products leaving the zone (cooking or 50 kGy gamma irradiation) represent the domestic Appropriate Level of Protection (ALOP) for prawns originating from a WSSV positive zone.

Aquaculture has the fastest disease emergence rate of all food production sectors, however the Federal Governments import risk analysis (IRA) process is slow and unresponsive. The original prawn IRA published in 2009 took 14 years to complete, but was operational for only 7 years before it failed. Its review has taken over 4 years, and during this time many new prawn diseases have emerged overseas. Scathing reports by the Inspector General of Biosecurity and the Auditor General demonstrate the current decadal scale IRA process (and its recommended testing programs) cannot cope. Beginning to futureproof the seafood sector against emerging biosecurity threats is as simple as cooking all imported prawn products, as required by Australia's obligations under the SPF Agreement, based on the principle of consistency of ALOP. Such arrangements would not discriminate against Australian businesses, and would futureproof biosecurity against both known and emerging prawn diseases, while reducing costs and simplifying compliance. Without futureproofing, exotic disease incursions will continue at an increasing rate, and future generations of Australians and our aquatic environment will suffer for these shortcomings.

Title, full name

Dr Ben Diggles, Director, DigsFish Services Pty Ltd.

Biography

Dr Ben Diggles is a marine biologist who specialises in study of the health of aquatic animals and their environment. He established DigsFish Services (www.digsfish.com) in 2003 to provide aquatic animal health services to Industries and Governments throughout Australasia. Dr Diggles has published hundreds of papers and reports over the past 30 years on issues as diverse as diseases and parasites of wild and aquacultured fish and shellfish, national and international biosecurity frameworks, pathogen and pest risk analyses, fish welfare, fish kill investigations and environmental standards for fishing tournaments.