The Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy

Sharee Glasson describes the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy

Abstract

Australia, as an island nation, provides both risks and opportunities for the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. The Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) addresses quarantine risks such as the potential incursion of weeds, pests and diseases across the 'top end'. The strategy includes domestic monitoring; domestic surveys; quarantine at the border; overseas activities; and work with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

Introduction

As the largest island in the world, and the smallest continent, Australia is presented with some unique quarantine opportunities and threats. The opportunities come in the form of not sharing a land border with other countries and, thus, being able to apply rigorous but fair quarantine at airports, seaports, and in international mail centres. The threats are due to Australia's enormous coastline, popularity of that coastline for boating and shipping, relatively sparse population, presence of extensive cattle herds and feral animals, and proximity to countries with agricultural pests and diseases exotic to Australia. Once established, exotic pests and diseases may be very difficult or impossible to eradicate and may seriously harm public health, the environment, and agricultural production.

One of the solutions to these threats is the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS), a series of intermeshed activities aimed at protecting northern areas from pest and disease incursions. NAQS activities depend on the co-operation of communities and organisations, and are led by the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS).

NAQS at a glance

NAQS was established in 1990 to:

- identify and evaluate quarantine risks to northern Australia; and
- provide early detection and warning of new pests through surveys and monitoring, border activities and public awareness.

The strategy underpins Australia's maintenance and expansion of export markets, protects plants and animals, and assists in the identification of new pests, weeds or diseases that enter Australia. It is the only quarantine program that combines pre-border, border and post-border activities.

As with most work in agricultural risks and emergencies, NAQS relies heavily on the support of Australian communities and industry. NAQS activities centre around staff in Broome, Darwin, Weipa, Bamaga, Mareeba, Cairns, Torres Strait Islands and Canberra, who are very active in the field. NAQS staff also work with neighbouring countries on quarantine activities of mutual benefit.

NAQS activities

NAQS activities include:

- domestic monitoring;
- domestic surveys;
- quarantine at the border;
- overseas activities; and
- working with northern communities.

Domestic monitoring

Early warning of disease or pest incursions into northern Australia is provided by NAQS monitoring activities and information that predicts the behaviour of introduced species. NAQS uses insect traps and sentinel animal herds to monitor for pests and diseases including:

- exotic fruit flies;
- screw-worm fly;
- species of Culicoides that are vectors of bluetongue virus and other arboviruses;
- Japanese encephalitis virus; and
- surra.

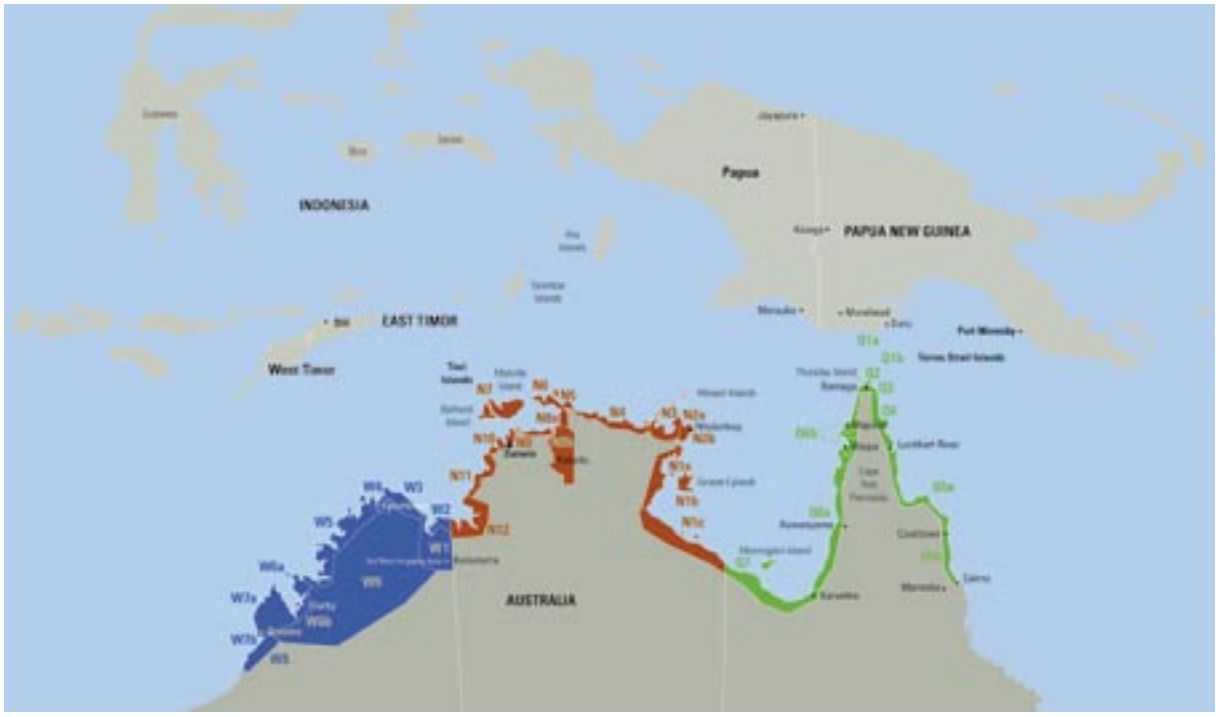
Domestic surveys

NAQS domestic survey areas are classified into risk zones, from very high to very low. Surveys are conducted regularly across regions of northern Australia most vulnerable to incursions of exotic pests, weeds and diseases. The frequency of surveys is determined by these risk ratings, with surveys ranging from once every five years for very low zones, to two or more times a year for very high risk zones.

Surveys are normally confined to a coastal strip from Broome on Australia's west coast across to Cairns on the east coast, including islands, with extensions into other high-risk areas (see map on following page). The surveys cover cultivated and naturalised plants, feral and domestic animals with a focus on target organisms, and specialised surveys for selected pests and plant hosts.

Quarantine at the border

Monitoring of dinghy traffic and light aircraft movements within and across the Torres Strait is carried out by NAQS in addition to the routine



NAQS conducts surveys for pests, diseases and weeds. Each of the regions shown in colour is surveyed at a frequency corresponding to the risk of entry. NAQS also conducts collaborative activities in agreed areas of East Timor, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea

inspection of all goods by AQIS at international ports. Recreational and fishing vessels sailing the far north coast of Queensland are the target of public awareness activities and inspection throughout the year. Goods on aircraft traveling south from the Torres Strait to the mainland, and south from Cape York, are also inspected.

Overseas activities

Australia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste (East Timor) co-operate in quarantine matters. NAQS officers regularly visit neighbouring countries to share information on pests and diseases and to resolve matters of mutual concern.

Teams conduct surveys for quarantine pests and diseases in collaboration with their colleagues in neighbouring countries. The information is used by AQIS and Australia's agricultural industries to assess quarantine risks. The pest and disease status of neighbouring countries informs the kinds of quarantine checks in place at Australia's ports. It also informs the pests and diseases targeted during NAQS domestic surveys.

Working with northern communities

NAQS depends heavily on the existing level of support and co-operation from the very diverse range of northern communities in:

- compliance with quarantine restrictions on goods movements;
- permission to survey traditional and pastoral lands; and
- recognition and reporting of signs of exotic pests, weeds and diseases, or other potential quarantine threats.

Success stories

Some recent success stories from NAQS include:

- detection of fruit flies through routine monitoring;
- inspection of luggage and fishing vessels at the border;
- assisting Timor Leste to develop a quarantine service; and
- detection of Siam weed by a northern community.

A quarantine officer clearing a foreign yacht

NAQS monitoring

During 2003-04, as part of ongoing NAQS monitoring, major tropical fruit growing regions in north Queensland were protected from the potentially devastating Asian papaya and New Guinea fruit flies. Both flies were detected in the Torres Strait and subsequent control strategies put in place.

Quarantine officer clearing a fruit fly trap

Timor-Leste border inspection

At the border

During 2003–04, Torres Strait officers inspected and cleared luggage from more than 100,000 passengers moving between quarantine zones in the Torres Strait. Inspection of illegal fishing vessels and treatment for pests was also undertaken.

In Timor-Leste

Over the past few years NAQS staff have participated in a major project to help Timor-Leste develop a quarantine service. The involvement included extensive training, developing processing and procedures, and assisting with draft legislation.

Working with northern communities

During 2003–04, specimens leading to the detection and eradication of incidences of Siam weed were among samples submitted to NAQS officers by northern communities. In the Territory, Aboriginal rangers continued to collect and send samples to NAQS scientists for testing for a range of exotic pathogens. This co-operation from communities vastly extends the reach of NAQS monitoring work in these remote, sparsely populated and high-risk regions of Australia.

Conclusion

NAQS is an essential program in the protection of Australia from weeds, pests and diseases. The key to the success of NAQS is co-operation and partnerships with Indigenous communities and neighbouring countries.

Author
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