



Blueberry Rust Technical Review Final Report

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Executive Summary

The Blueberry Rust Technical Review has been completed and members of the reference group have advised support for the following recommendation of the Technical Review:

- De-regulate Blueberry rust (BBR) immediately and support industry for twelve months to offset the recent negative impacts on growers.

This decision was made based on evidence that BBR is now widespread and established in Tasmania, ongoing regulations on infected premises are onerous and damaging to those businesses, and regulated interstate markets are no longer accessible. The urgency to de-regulate is based on continued regulations negatively impacting severely on businesses – especially nurseries who cannot sell their plants.

Background

Blueberry rust (*Thekopsora minima*) is a serious fungal disease of blueberries that causes extensive defoliation on plants with severe infections and can impact on fruit yields and fruit quality. It affects blueberries, cranberries, and huckleberries as well as a few other host plants. Symptoms include necrotic lesions on the top side of leaves with yellow-orange powdery pustules that emerge on the underside of the lesions. BBR spreads on the wind via airborne spores but can also be carried through contact on people's clothes and movement of wildlife – making it very difficult to eradicate or manage once established.

The disease first arrived in mainland Australia (NSW and Queensland) in 2001 and was soon deemed not eradicable. Since that time Tasmania has regulated for it by listing it as a List A Disease under the *Tasmanian Plant Quarantine Act 1997* and putting in place *Import Requirement 28 Blueberry Rust – Hosts and Carriers* to mitigate the risk of entry.

Despite these regulations, BBR was detected in 2014 on imported plants via the retail nursery sector. An emergency response to BBR was implemented and in July 2016 after extensive surveillance BBR was deemed eradicated in Tasmania. However, a few weeks later in August 2016 BBR was detected on a large commercial orchard in the north-west of the state. Unlike the 2014 incursion, the source of the infection could not be determined, and the scale of the infection was much greater with many thousands of plants affected.

BBR in Tasmania has been under a formal containment plan since 2017. This plan was developed and implemented following the determination that blueberry rust was not technically feasible to eradicate from Tasmania. This determination was made based on advice from scientific experts from New South Wales (NSW) and the Tasmanian Institute of Agriculture (TIA) in 2017.

The containment plan was put in place primarily to allow market access to regulating states on the mainland (Victoria (VIC), South Australia (SA) and Western Australia (WA)) via a Pest Free Places of Production (PFPP) protocol for growers that remained free of the disease. BBR was restricted to infected premises via legal documents including site management plans (SMPs). SMPs were designed to slow the



spread of blueberry rust and 'buy time' for industry to adjust to managing the disease, and for additional approaches to management to be developed through R&D being conducted by TIA.

The containment plan was never intended as a long-term or permanent approach to blueberry rust management in Tasmania. It includes triggers that, if met, require a review of the planned actions.

Current Situation

The Tasmanian Score Card for 2019-2020 reported that the blueberry industry has a farm gate value of \$25 million and a processed value of \$31.5 million. Total production volume for 2019-20 was 1,351 tonnes. There are just over 70 commercial orchards across the state with around eight of those exporting to regulating states under the PFPP protocol. These businesses have been obtaining premium prices for their fruit, especially in SA.

Over twenty blueberry rust infected premises have been identified over the last six years, with more than half of those detected in recent months with BBR being detected for the first time in the south of the State. These findings indicate a recent surge in the spread of the disease organism, and loss of its contained status in Tasmania. This view supported by TIA and BT plant pathologists who have advised that the BBR is now established and widespread in Tasmania.

The following table indicates how the number of detections has increased this season:

Season	No. of Infected Premises detected	Region
2016/17	3	NW
2017/18	2	NW
2018/19	2	NW
2019/20	0	
2020/21	2	N & NW
2021/22	16	S, N & NW
Total	25	

The evolving BBR situation was conveyed to SA and WA with each new infected premises as part of mandatory communications under the PFPP protocol (noting that VIC stopped regulating in mid-2021 after BBR establishment there). This has led to concerns in those states of the increased risks of BBR on imported fruit. In April 2022, WA announced it was dealing with an incursion and have de-regulated BBR.

Deregulation in these states means that only SA (and Tasmania) still regulate for BBR, however SA have advised they no longer accept the PFPP protocol. This means that there are no restrictions on interstate trade except to SA who require chemically treated orchards under a Trade Agreement, and within Tasmania where infected properties must also be chemically treated. Requirements to chemically treat infected properties cannot be met by organically certified growers which means they cannot sell fresh fruit to local markets and retain their organic status.



Due to the recent surge in infections, the Minister for primary Industries approved a recommendation by Biosecurity Tasmania (BT) to conduct a technical review to assess the current containment-based approach to BBR. The technical review was undertaken by BT and facilitated by an industry-based Reference Group with technical expertise and industry knowledge representation.

BBR Technical Review

The BBR Technical Review considered the following:

- The biology of BBR and its status in Tasmania (the science)
- Biosecurity principles around pest regulation
- The market access situation both interstate and within Tasmania
- Impacts on affected growers due to BBR regulation
- Any remaining benefits in continuing BBR regulation
- Costs of BBR regulation to government and taxpayers

In summary, the Technical Review concluded that:

- BBR is widespread and established in Tasmania,
- Tasmania cannot continue to justify continued regulation of BBR as a List A Disease including *Import Requirement 28 Blueberry Rust – Hosts and Carriers* as the pest is now established and biosecurity principles require a least trade restrictive approach,
- There are no benefits in maintaining BBR regulation for market access, however there are benefits in de-regulation as affected organic growers will be able to sell their fresh fruit within Tasmania and continue to maintain their organic status,
- There are minimal remaining benefits in continuing BBR regulation, and

The Technical Review considered the following future options:

1. Maintain status quo (continue with regulation and containment policies)
2. De-regulate BBR immediately and support industry for twelve months
3. De-regulate BBR immediately

Option #2 was recommended by the Technical Review and was also supported by the reference group - de-regulate BBR immediately and support industry for twelve months. Support initiatives identified were:

- free diagnostics for suspect BBR
- promotion of benefits / profile of Tasmanian blueberries
- continued research and development by TIA
- provision of advice for accessing markets
- property inspections to meet markets

The group noted the urgency of implementing the recommendation to minimise the negative impacts on growers whilst regulation remains as affected nurseries are unable to sell their plants.



Recommendation / Advice to Secretary

- De-regulate BBR immediately and support industry for twelve months to offset the recent negative impacts on growers.

Actions following Secretary approval

- Send out decision to industry with opportunity for input on the support options
- Consider industry support options for implementation in more detail
- Promote benefits/profile of Tas blueberries
- Items to revoke – List A Declaration, Import Requirement 28, all S56 directions and other directions on properties
- Progress a Communications Plan for the 12-month support period







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