



16 Aug 2017
Weekly Times, Melbourne

Author: ALEX SAMPSON • Section: General News • Article type : News Item
Audience : 53,990 • Page: 6 • Printed Size: 369.00cm² • Market: VIC • Country: Australia
ASR: AUD 4,221 • Words: 477 • Item ID: 828231973

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PEST FIRST

Alert on vineyard virus

By ALEX SAMPSON

A GRAPEVINE virus never before detected in Australia has been found in vineyards in NSW and South Australia.

Last week it was announced grapevine pinot gris virus, which can reduce yields by up to 80 per cent, had made its way to Australia.

The virus may have come from Europe, the US, Canada or China, where it is established.

Immediate measures have been taken to contain the spread of the virus, with all plant material on the affected properties isolated for further testing, or destroyed.

The discovery raises questions about Australian biosecurity, which some experts believe needs more data, research and investment to prevent new pests and diseases arriving.

Over the past three years Australia has seen the introduction of pests and diseases such as fire ants in Queensland, Khapra beetle and Russian wheat aphid in South Australia, and Asian honey bees and varroa mites in Queensland.

Monash biodiversity scientist Prof Melodie McGeoch said Australia had a good

understanding of what drove invasions and incursions, but a

rise in trade, and the diversity of that trade, had made protecting Australian shores even more difficult.

"We don't have adequate data to come up with a well-supported set of priority interventions," Prof McGeoch said.

"What we can do at this stage is predict where things are more likely to come in, but we don't actually have the data to test those predictions because not enough effort is going into connecting data on interceptions and making that data available to researchers."

In December a review by the Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity said Australia "urgently" needed a permanent, vertically integrated biosecurity research organisation.

Agriculture Victoria chief plant health officer Gabrielle Vivian-Smith said there was a strong possibility the grape-

vine pinot gris virus had been in Australia for a while, but that it was only detected with the use of new technology.

Dr Vivian-Smith said it was possible the virus might be found elsewhere in the coming

months as testing increased.

Centre of Excellence for Biosecurity Risk Analysis director Andrew Robinson said it was impossible to stop all pest and disease incursions.

"We can't afford any more to think about everything getting stopped at the border because incursions are inevitable," he said.

"The only way to zero out the risk altogether is to build a big wall between Australia and all of the sources of threat, including stopping all activities at port, stopping international travel, stopping international trade, and then stopping the wind, tide and boats."

Mr Robinson said he would be worried if there were not known incursions, because it would mean Australian biosecurity systems were not detecting new pests and diseases.

"It's upsetting for the industries and individuals that are affected by incursions, but the fact we find them and have an opportunity to engage with them is evidence that our biosecurity system is functioning," he said.



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PEST INTENTIONS


Pests and diseases that have arrived in Australia in the past three years




PINOT GRIS VIRUS
NSW, SA




VARROA MITES
QLD



RUSSIAN WHEAT APHID
SA



FIRE ANT
QLD



KHAPRA BEETLE
SA