Plant Germplasm Import Council
Summary of Meeting 6 November 2023

1. TRANSITIONS

New members are Fleur Francois (replacing Veronica Herrera) and Lisa Winthrop (replacing Peter Thomson). A resignation was accepted from Stephanie Dijkstra. The EOI process to fill the PGIC membership vacancy is underway.

2. PHEL / PEQ

2.1 Update on PHEL Customer Feedback on Proposed Changes to Test Prices, level 3B PEQ Services, and L3B PEQ Booking Policy

Since the last meeting, MPI has asked for feedback from customers on proposed changes to diagnostic testing prices, L3B PEQ greenhouse prices, and a new L3B PEQ booking & prioritisation policy. A letter was sent to 118 PEQ importers/industry customers and 244 PHEL customers for cost recovered testing activities on 22 August detailing the proposed changes, giving them the opportunity to provide feedback, and inviting them to an information session. Customer feedback closes on 6 November. Three online information sessions were held, providing information on MPI cost recovery principles/framework, an introduction to the costing model, the proposed pricing schedules, and the L3B PEQ booking & prioritisation policy. Feedback on the proposed changes will be carefully considered before finalising the new prices and booking policy. The timing for when MPI will finalise and publish the new prices and booking policy is dependent on this process and discussions with the incoming Minister regarding their priorities. PGIC will be updated after all the customer feedback has been received and reviewed.

PGIC discussed the Biosecurity New Zealand revenue imperatives and industry perspectives on cost implications.

It was noted that the variables at play which influence costs faced by importers include the tolerance for risk, the requirements of the end-to-end plant biosecurity system, the efficiency of operations within the system, the degree of government subsidisation, and the volumes coming through.

Concluding comments from Biosecurity New Zealand noted that the strategy was developed with the aim of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the overall plant import system. One part of that is to improve the PEQ capacity and related facilities and to update the cost recovery components. The other big component lies in seeking efficiencies and speeding up processes. Biosecurity New Zealand is making progress in many areas.

2.2 Strategic impacts of PHEL costs and regulatory requirements (industry paper)

An industry paper stimulated good discussion about the strategic issues relating to PHEL's proposal to apply MPI's cost recovery policy to quarantine and testing service for plant imports. The paper expressed a view that the strategic trade-offs between different parts of the import system relate to: 1) quality of biosecurity risk protection (the requirements, the quality of PEQ and testing), which comes at a cost; 2) cost and who pays – reducing cost would require either a subsidy or changing the import system (how to do that without trading off quality?); and 3) demand – what happens to demand if costs to importers are too high?

Key discussion points were: the role of PGIC (PGIC can provide advice to help MPI get efficiencies in a system to allow the safe import of plant germplasm into the country); what advice does PGIC have for MPI and industry; What actions does PGIC wish to pursue in relation to this issue (it is timely to revisit the Strategy overall objectives, then look at projects/priorities in the work programme in terms of impact on efficiency and effectiveness to the system. Agreed a small work group should review the Strategy and report to the next meeting).

3. PGIC STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS REPORT

3.1 Progress Summary

1. Overall, Tranche 1 projects are progressing well, however there are delays expected to the completion of several projects.
2. Two Tranche 2 projects have started: PEQ7 – High Throughput Sequencing, and PR8 – PEQ/Offshore Policy for the Greenlife Pathway.
3. BP1 – Border Clearance and APHD interactions - COMPLETED.
4. PEQ1/2 – Cost Recovery and Space Sharing projects have progressed, allowing public feedback on the proposals.

3.2 Tranche 1

a) BP1 (Border Clearance and APHD interactions) - project close out

The project has been delivered, and a summary of findings was presented. While generally performing well there are three areas of interaction where improvements can be made in communication between Border Clearance and Plant Health teams within Biosecurity New Zealand. These include formally recording processes for existing interactions in the process documentation system; develop and share a list of subject matter experts in both teams including points of contact for urgent issues; and the timing of interactions about synonym requests. MPI noted that border clearance delays occur when importers make synonym requests only at the point of arrival rather than prior to shipment.
Council members were encouraged to influence their constituents and anyone else connected with importers of ornamental plants to submit synonym requests prior to shipment.

b) PEQ7 High Throughput Sequencing (HTS) project update and direction

This project is being split into two parts: PEQ7 - Validate HTS methods on relevant plant samples and implement HTS into existing PEQ operations; and PEQ10 - Policy framework to inform decisions about the implications of HTS in New Zealand's biosecurity system.

There was discussion of the issues Biosecurity New Zealand needs to consider for the policy framework and wider thinking, such as how we make decisions on non-regulated organisms identified using HTS.

There was some discussion around detecting non-regulated viruses and when action should be taken if they are detected.

c) OS 2/3/4/5 Offshore Pathways workstream checkpoint

The Offshore (OS) workstream has four projects: (1) OS2 Facility monitoring and audit; (2) OS3 Material impacted by facility non-compliance; (3) OS4 Verifiers policy; (4) OS5 Audit cost recovery policy.

OS2 has a process for thorough audits. In-country audits are the priority, and remote audits are an alternative option if travel is not possible (e.g. under pandemic travel restrictions), or if not considered necessary. A communications plan has been implemented. The project is almost completed.

OS4 is in a similar state of completion. Biosecurity New Zealand will provide more information to PGIC about considerations in developing the policy for offshore verifiers.

d) BP2 – Border Services process and system clarification

This project aims to audit the Border processes for efficiency and clarify these for importers. Outcomes of the project were presented as examples of the benefits from this work:

1. A regulatory change example: removal of requirement for a declaration form for non-pelleted seed imports has sped up the border process for importers because there is more compliant paperwork.

2. Border process change example*: Alternaria* fungi made non-regulated on the radish seed pathway; has reduced clearance delays for some radish seed consignments.
3. Example where importer actions will lead to change: Biosecurity New Zealand is drafting guidance so that importers know what action they can do differently to improve the import system and reduce delays for their consignment.

e) PR2 Communications and Engagement

The project has been progressing with the development of a draft communications plan and stakeholder mapping. The next stage of the project is to determine communication preferences for stakeholders. PGIC members had been asked to input information about the various communication touch points (e.g., publications, forums newsletters, AGMs, web updates) in their sector networks.

4. PR3 NEW AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES TO IMPROVE SYSTEM OPERATION

A presentation was given about PHEL's active work in assessing and trialling new methodologies to improve the importation of plant germplasm. These improvements aim to increase the efficiency of testing of plant material and reduce the cost to importers. Members of the PHEL team are actively engaged globally, publishing research, collaborating, and attending conferences where possible. Numerous research projects using or developing new technologies are underway to improve the plant germplasm import pathway. Examples of emerging and established technologies relevant to Diagnostics and Surveillance are (1) High Throughput Sequencing (HTS), (2) eRNA/DNZ, (3) Point-of-use detection, (4) Spectroscopy, (5) High-affinity ligands.

PGIC noted the work underway to assess and integrate new methods and technologies to improve the plant germplasm pathway; that PEQ6 will continue to report progress toward the strategic aim of maintaining a programme of work developing and verifying new methodologies for innovation and will chart a roadmap of how the individual projects will feed into the strategic aim.

PGIC noted the commissioning of a proposed additional project 'PEQ10 – Policy for the implementation of broad HTS analysis of plant germplasm'. This will provide the options and discussion for the wider implementation of HTS as the technology progresses.
PGIC will receive an annual update on 'What is hot in technology' in the labs and elsewhere.

5. OTHER BUSINESS

5.1 PGIC meeting dates in 2024

18 March 1 July, 11 November.

5.2 Sustaining the work of the Council

With the change of government, there will be some transition. Members discussed the importance of sustaining the work of the Council. There has been a big investment in the PGIC process over the last three years and it is a highly valuable forum. There are some real returns to be had and it is important to continue the roll out of projects which operationalise the strategic plan and capture the gains envisaged in the plan.

5.3 B3 – Better Border Biosecurity – research projects being funded

A question was raised around how PGIC could remain abreast of work underway under the B3 programme that intersects with the PGIC objectives, e.g., tissue culture. A Better Border Biosecurity (B3) project lead will be invited to update PGIC and give visibility of what is on the programme.

5.4 Board Secretariat leaving

A vote of thanks was given to Clare Ansley who had acted as Board Secretariat for PGIC for the last three years.

Murray Sherwin
PGIC Chair