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## Q&A

Chair: Cathie Warburton, Grains Research & Development Corporation

Panel: Nicola Hinder PSM; David Gale; Dr Jay Anderson; Dr Walter Okelo

**Q:** Peter Wynn, Charles Sturt University.

A question for Nicola. With Codex, you have got a large group of countries that cover the whole spectrum of economic development, from the underdeveloped to the most developed. Do you ever have to make compromises to accommodate some of the relatively poorly developed technologies in the underdeveloped countries when you are developing your different standards, so that perhaps the can of tomatoes I buy from Australia is the same as the can of tomatoes I buy from any one of the underdeveloped economies?

**A:** Nicola Hinder

That's a really good question, and I would like to flip it around by saying there are two approaches. In relation to Australia's engagement in Codex, one thing we are very mindful of as well is our own biosecurity standards, and what that would mean for trade in food products or other commodities that would come to Australia. In Codex, though, I would say that there is never a concession. I would say that it is more of a compromise. One of the benefits that is behind Codex is that it is a consensus-based organisation, and that means that we manage to both consider and then work through a wide variety of views. Ultimately the standards that we set are non-binding. What they do, though, is provide the benchmark for international food safety standards and for countries to lift to, to be able to meet those standards, and at times countries also exceed those standards because of their own requirements, either around biosecurity or their own natural food systems.

In the entire time that I've been engaged with Codex in various forms on and off over the last 20 years, I have not yet seen an example where consensus on the standard has been unable to be reached ... with the exception of the meeting that is happening this evening, where we are actually reconvening at Codex because we were not able to reach agreement on the use of a particular veterinary medicine and its application in food. And that is where I say that there are never concessions given in order to be able to develop a standard, but there is agreement there around having it be, if we can, a consensus-based approach. And the reason why I draw that out is because, as I referenced in the speech, the trade in food is huge, and when we are talking food we are not just talking muesli bars or cereal packets or highly processed food products. Anything that is exported as a commodity product from agriculture effectively is food.

But as more and more trading partners become more and more developed, and as there are geopolitical tensions and others that arise, we are seeing

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This record has been prepared from a transcript.

some trading partners setting their own national standards and attempting to be able to bring those into the Codex sphere. And that is why it is particularly important for Australia to be engaged in Codex, as much as it is important for us to be engaged in the work of our other two sisters, because we do have a very balanced and a very pragmatic approach, and we can work hard to be able to bring about consensus where there may not be acceptance of views, and it may not be the middle road, but it is certainly not the extremity either.

**Q:** Carol Quashie-Williams, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

Two questions. For Nicola: Is there an environmental sister? And for David: is there an animal sentinel group that uses zoos, the zoo network?

**A:** Nicola Hinder

Is there an environmental sister? Absolutely. There are a range of what I would call environmental sisters that operate across the environment, both in terms of protecting natural resources, and in terms of furthering global standards. I think everyone has also seen our engagement, including on the climate sisters that operate as part of COP [Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change], etcetera, etcetera.

One of the big benefits about the amalgamation of Agriculture, Water and the Environment as one Department now is that we are really bringing together a consensus-based approach to how we actually manage our natural resource environment; so that it's not only our agricultural and food production systems, but also our environment and our management practices.

**A:** David Gale

You asked if there is a sentinel network for zoos. That is a fascinating question that I do not know the answer to, I'm sorry.

**A:** Nicola Hinder

I cannot answer for zoos, but I think Helen Scott-Orr would be able to nod at me if I say that there is a consensus- and ability-based approach across both the zoos and the natural environments, working with the State Governments. For example, there is the Sentinel Hive Program, which is operating in the far north of Australia, where beehives are being monitored for the incursions of foreign pests coming with bees; there's the Sentinel Herd Program; there is also environment, and there are also management programs that operate in zoos. But it has been quite some time since I was involved in those matters, so I'm not certain.

**Q:** Howard Parry-Husbands, Pollinate and Metamorphosis

I am very encouraged to see so many mentions of systems thinking, co-design and systems approaches and the core beliefs to the work we do, and Dr Okelo's insight, which is that human and environmental systems are only as strong as the weakest link. My question is to the panel: is there enough collaboration across departments, between scientists and communicators, between nations? And also, what should be done to improve collaboration and co-design?

**A:** Walter Okelo

That is a good question, for everyone. I think it is very important to make sure that we do not only invest in one system which may not work. We need to think broadly; we need to think where these problems are coming from; and at the centre of it all we also need to think of the people who are affected, because they are the people who are bearing the burden. So I think it is very important that we take the systems approach, and also that we add a bit of economics into it, because at the end of the day someone has to pay.

**A:** Nicola Hinder

I like to think of it as a cheesecake. There are layers that go towards management, and there are layers that go towards communication and control and coordination. I think that across government collectively we have always been good, but I think we are getting much better at joining up and making sure that all the voices are heard and that positions are formed. And when I talk about a cheesecake approach, I think about some of the things that we have just done recently in trade: going down to the local government level, and then all the way out to a huge range of producers that we have never had to engage with before.

I think communication and coordination are always going to be the key, and I look at some of the underpinning documents that we have in our animal health and plant health management sphere: the EADRA [Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement], the EPPRD [Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed] and the NEBRA [National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement]; how we go to respond to animal and plant pest and diseases when they are found, bringing everyone together; a common source of funding; agreed response arrangements. These mean that the communication and coordination do not have to happen at the start of a response, because everyone knows exactly what we are doing.

It is the same, I think, with the work that Andrew Robinson (who gave the overview to Session 4 today) is doing in CEBRA, the Centre of Excellence and Biosecurity Risk Analysis: that forward-looking approach; being able to make sure that we have done the modelling, we have decided on the approach, we have got the sign up for everyone that is engaged. I am certainly not going to say that there is always going to be great communication, because sometimes communication fails, but the commitment to communication is absolutely there.

**Q:** Luisa Olmo, University of New England

My question is for Jay. Based on your experience working in Laos for six weeks, how important do you think the role of diagnostics is in some of these systems in Laos, when it seems that sometimes you can make recommendations based just on what you think? What are your thoughts on that?

**A:** Jay Anderson

I think it is very important that we can diagnose things correctly. I think it is important also that we do it in a way that makes sure we are transferring back those skills to our colleagues who are going to remain in country. And that is what I was trying to do: that is, we can't always do everything straightaway

at that moment, but we can make sure that we say we think this is what the situation is and that this is the best way of managing it, and we will bring you further information, and make sure we empower our colleagues there to be able to do that.

In that pest and disease program that the Crawford Fund have run in Lao PDR since 2009, pest lists have been developed for important vegetable crops. When you go into these laboratories you see images on the wall, and you see the English word and you see the Lao word; these kinds of educational things.

Yes I think diagnostics are very important. But also, sometimes, one can talk about general measures that are important. For example, for some leaf spot pathogens it is not important to know exactly what the pathogen species is. Knowing the species helps us in terms of our biosecurity, because there are species there that we don't want in Australia. But a lot of general mechanisms for control on-farm are similar, and for the growers it is important that you explain the lifecycle and why it is important to de-leaf.

There are two different types of banana weevil borer. That fact doesn't make much difference to the farmer, but we can say to them that as soon as you harvest your bunch you should chop up the pseudo stem, so it will break down quickly and then you won't have a problem. That is the kind of information we need to get to our colleagues, so that they are able to carry that advice on after we leave.

**Chair:** Thank you to everyone.