# Xylella in China – Introduction of high-risk emergency measures for host nursery stock

Video description and transcript

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## Introduction

This is the accessible text transcript of an industry webinar entitled ***Xylella in China – Introduction of high-risk emergency measures for host nursery stock.***

## Transcript

Hosted by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

Good morning everyone and thank you for joining today’s information session on the upcoming introduction of high-risk emergency measures for Xylella in nursery stock from China.

My name is Wayne See Kee. I’m the acting First Assistant Secretary of the Biosecurity Plant and Science Services Division at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

I’d like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians and Owners of the land on which we meet here today. For us joining from Canberra, I wish to acknowledge the Ngunnawal peoples as the Custodians of the lands that we’re meeting on, and to recognise any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and the region. I’d also like to acknowledge the Elders, past, present and emerging, and any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who may be present here at our meeting today.

Please note that this meeting is being recorded for anyone who couldn’t attend. I’ll shortly handover to my colleagues who will take you through the detail of today’s session. However, before I do, I’d like to emphasize the importance of why we are introducing these new measures.

Xylella, as most people will know, is Australia’s highest National Priority Plant Pest. It causes a devastating and incurable disease in a wide range of plant species. It can infect hundreds of native, commercial and ornamental plant species including wine grapes, olives and fruit and nut trees, and would have significant consequences if established in Australia.

We have determined that Xylella is now present in mainland China and given this, it’s critical that we introduce enhanced regulatory measures for imported host nursery stock from China to protect Australia from this devastating disease.

The purpose of today’s session is to provide a detailed overview of these measures and why we’re introducing them and to give you an opportunity to ask any questions.

I’ll now handover to James Kirkham who is the Director of the Propagative and Research Material section within our Plant Import Operations branch. Good morning James and welcome.

Thank you Wayne, and good morning everyone. I’ll give a quick overview of today’s session and will provide a little bit more background in addition to what Wayne has already covered.

Today we are going to give an overview of Xylella, talk a bit more about the evidence of its presence in China and the assessment process that we used, cover off our plan to update our Xylella emergency measures to transition from regulating nursery stock at a plant family level to a genus level. Then we will provide more of an overview of the new emergency measures for China and we’ll cover off the implementation dates, transitional arrangements and notice of intent to vary permits process. Then, again we will have an opportunity to answer any questions that are asked during the session. So you should be able to post questions as part of this presentation, either throughout or at the end and we will work through and do our best to answer those questions in the session today.

To cover off a little bit more of an overview, as Wayne mentioned at the start of the session, Xylella is Australia’s number one National Priority Plant Pest. It’s an invasive pathogen that can cause significant and devastating diseases in many commercial crops including grape vines, citrus, olives, various nut crops, avocado and coffee. It also impacts amenity trees such as oak and acacia. It has a wide host range. There are over 700 species of plants that are known hosts of the disease, that have been reported so far worldwide. It would cost Australia billions of dollars if it was to establish. An example of some of those costs, in 2024 Europe estimated the cost of a Xylella incursion since it was first detected in Italy at $1 billion euros which is approximately $1.6 billion Australia dollars. The department’s ABARES section estimated that an incursion of Xylella could cost the Australian horticultural industry between $1.2 billion and $11.1 billion in 2017-2018 dollars when that report was published. So, it is significant impact if Xylella was to establish in Australia. It has already spread to many countries in the world, and most recently reported in China.

So, touching briefly on some examples of Xylella diseases. It can cause very quick and severe symptoms on infected plants. Symptoms can vary really widely. Some plants can show no symptoms at all. It can extend to leaf scorch, plant dieback or even death. It’s known to be spread by sap sucking vector insects that feed primarily on the xylem fluid of plants. So, a couple of examples in the pictures we have here. On the left we’ve got an olive grove infection with significant plant dieback. In the middle we’ve got time change in Acacia from 2014 to 2016 where you again see significant plant dieback from the Xylella infection. On the right we’ve got some of the insect vectors that include sharp shooters and leaf hoppers. These are particular insects that have been reported in Georgia in the USA.

So talking a little bit about our recent assessment of the presence of Xylella in China. Just to give background, the department is a science-based regulator. Regulatory scientists are constantly referring to new and emerging information to keep up to date with current and emergency phytosanitary issues. Often this information is reviewed in formal scientific journals, where we have peer reviewed articles and confidence in the information published. In October 2024, the department became aware of a scientific journal article reporting Xylella causing disease in walnut trees in China. We reviewed this information in the article and determined this provides sufficient evidence for Australia to recognise and regulate China as a Xylella high-risk country. This means that nursery stock of the recognised host of Xylella in China will now be regulated in line with emergency measures that were first introduced in 2015. We do have those emergency measures in place. They enable regulation of plant material from countries where the pathogen has been recorded.

I’ll talk a little bit now about the move from family to genus level regulation of Xylella hosts. Australia’s Xylella emergency measures currently regulate all plants belonging to the family level that contain at least 1 confirmed host of Xylella. To date, the department has identified 112 plant families that contain Xylella hosts. Some of these families do contain quite large number of genera known to contain hosts of Xylella.

In addition to changing China to a high-risk country under the current emergency measures. We’re using this opportunity to update the emergency measures to transition from regulating at that plant family level to the plant genus level. You can see on the screen that there is a link to the department’s website where you can look more in detail of those genera that are Xylella hosts [agriculture.gov.au/Xylella-emergency-measures].

So noting the significant scale of this regulatory change across the departments systems and the import permits that are currently in place, the genus level regulations will be done in a phased approach. This will commence with the first phase for China. Because we’re introducing emergency measures, we’re using that opportunity to apply the new measures for China at the genera level. In phase 2, once we’ve completed that transition, we’ll then transition genus level regulation to all other exporting countries and we aim to do this by the end of 2025. It’s important to note, that during that transition, current import conditions will apply until they are updated and we work through that approach. As with all our other changes that we make that are significant, these changes will be published through additional Industry Advice Notices, BICON alerts and communicated to impacted permit holders before they are implemented.

So talking a little bit more around this regulatory change from family to genus level, there are two main reasons why we are updating this change. So firstly, this change is considered to still be managing the biosecurity risk of Xylella whilst supporting safe trade in line with our international obligations. So genus level regulation has been previously recommended in the draft Xylella pest risk analysis. This was released in 2022. It recommended changing this taxonomic level of regulation, regulating all plants with a genus that has 1 or more confirmed hosts of Xylella rather than regulating at the family level. During the public consultation period, no technical comments were received that opposed this recommendation. The department again came back and reviewed this recommendation in December 2024. While there continues to be reports of new Xylella hosts in the scientific literature since the emergency measures were first introduced in 2015, we have seen a general decline in the frequency of new hosts being discovered, particularly at the genus level. The department has concluded that the transitioning of emergency measures to the genus level for nursery stock pathways will continue to achieve Australia’s Appropriate Level of Protection which is our core guiding principle for managing import conditions. This reflects Australia’s contemporary approach to managing biosecurity risk.

In line with the existing practice, the department will remain vigilant and continue to monitor any new scientific evidence to determine if we need to broaden the Xylella emergency measures to additional host genera.

Secondly, in terms of the change, its expected that we will reduce the regulatory burden for some domestic importers and the nursery stock industry. The key difference here is that the number of genera that would be regulated under a genera level regulation versus family will move from 2,200 genera to 400. As a result, depending on the particular plant being imported, there will be a reduction in the regulatory burden for some importers that are importing those particular plants. Especially for non-tissue culture material that will otherwise require either mandatory hot water treatment or further growth in PEQ.

I’ll now handover to my colleague Jerem O’Callaghan who is also in the Propagative and Research material section. He will take you through more detail around the implementation process for these new measures for China. Thanks Jerem.

Thanks James and good morning everyone. China will be recognised as a high-risk Xylella country under our Xylella emergency measures from 31 January 2025. Xylella host nursery stock imported as tissue culture and non-tissue culture from China will be subject to increased testing and pre-export certification. This means that all tissue cultures must be derived from mother tissue cultures that were tested using 2 PCR tests and found free of Xylella. Details of the tests are listed on our current slide and emergency measures for Xylella webpage. We have received feedback that some of the information on this webpage is difficult to understand and we are in the process of updating our webpages and should have updates published prior to 31 January.

To reiterate, all tissue cultures must be derived from mother tissue cultures that were tested using 2 PCR tests and found free of Xylella. The phytosanitary certificate for each tissue culture consignment must include an additional declaration confirming this testing has occurred. We don’t recommend specific labs in China for this testing. Instead, we encourage importers to contact their overseas suppliers to determine whether they can meet these measures.

Non-tissue culture material must undergo one of the following measures on arrival in Australia. Hot-water treatment at 50 degrees Celsius for 45 minutes performed at an approved arrangement site, or the plants must undergo post entry quarantine at the Commonwealth Mickleham facility at Victoria for a minimum of 12 months with all plants tested for Xylella with PCR.

As mentioned earlier, these new conditions will commence on 31 January 2025. We will have transitional arrangements in place for consignments already in transit to Australia. This means that consignments accompanied by a phytosanitary certificate dated prior to 31 January will be permitted under existing conditions. This includes consignments that arrive in Australia after 31 January but were certified prior to that date. Consignments accompanied by phytosanitary certificate dated on or after 31 January must meet high-risk country conditions for Xylella.

All import permit holders affected by these changes have been notified by email and received a notice of intent to vary their permit. We will be varying all import permits affected by these changes at no cost to importers. All affected import permit holders should have already been contacted by the department. If you believe you are an affected import permit holder and have not been contacted, or received a notice of intent to vary, please contact us as soon as possible via our imports@aff.gov.au email address.

For those importers with permits for non-tissue culture plants, we’ve also been making phone calls to assist them in determining which option best suits their import needs. I’ll now hand back to James for some closing remarks before we open to questions.

Thanks Jerem. That concludes the end of our presentation. I appreciate everyone who has joined today to get the update and the additional information. We will shortly open to questions so please feel free to ask anything you would like clarity on. If you would like further information, I would encourage you to visit the website: agriculture.gov.au/Xylella-emergency-measures. Noting we are making updates to ensure it is clear as possible and we have the latest information available there. You can also contact us directly by emailing imports@aff.gov.au (subject line ‘Plant T2 Xylella in China).