



## **ANNOUNCEMENT INFORMATION PAPER – REGARDING A REVIEW OF BIOSECURITY IMPORT REQUIREMENTS FOR FRESH DATE FRUIT FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGION**

The Department of Agriculture and Water Resources is conducting a review of biosecurity import requirements (non-regulated risk analysis) for fresh date fruit (greater than 30 per cent moisture content) from the Middle East and North Africa region. The formal commencement of this review is in response to formal requests for market access for fresh date fruits from the Arab Republic of Egypt (Egypt), the Republic of Iraq (Iraq), the Republic of Tunisia (Tunisia) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The review will cover the Middle East and North Africa region which, for the purpose of this analysis, includes: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, UAE and Yemen. Fresh dates are of high cultural importance to the region, and represent the highest priority new market access request for several countries.

The department will be carrying out a regional review instead of individual reviews given pest statuses are similar across the region. All relevant pests in the region will be considered as part of the review.

Dates are fruit produced by the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) and are botanically berries with a single seed that grow in clusters. Depending on cultivar, dates may be oval, round, cylindrical or oblong in shape. Many cultivars are available for commercial production.

Dates for human consumption are classified into a number of different styles (shown in Figure 1) which correspond to different stages of development:

- Khalaal or fresh dates – the first ripened stage, 45-75 per cent moisture, firm and crunchy (*included in this review*)
- Rutab or ripe dates – 30-45 per cent moisture, high sugar (*included in this review*)
- Tamar or cured dates – 10-15 per cent moisture, very high sugar, very long shelf life (*trade from all countries already allowed*).



**Figure 1.** Examples of the different styles of dates for human consumption: a) khalaal stage, b) rutab stage and c) tamar stage. The appearance of each stage can differ with date variety.

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Australia currently has established import conditions for fresh dates (with a moisture content of greater than 30 per cent) from the United States of America (California) grown in areas free from fruit flies. Australia also has established import conditions for dried and semi-dried dates (30 per cent or less moisture content) that allow trade from all countries, providing certain risk management measures are undertaken.

A preliminary pest assessment for fresh dates from the Middle East and North Africa region has been undertaken. The assessment has found that (with one exception) the potential quarantine pests of concern identified so far are the same as, or similar to, pests that have been assessed previously by the department on dates (fresh, dried or semi-dried), or on other horticultural commodities, and that relevant risk management measures are already established. One new potential quarantine pest of concern (the lesser date moth, *Batrachedra amydraula*) has been assessed. The assessment has found that the likelihood and consequences of entry, establishment and spread are below Australia's Appropriate Level of Protection (ALOP) and therefore this pest is not likely to require any risk management measures (see 'Preliminary assessment of dates from the Middle East and North Africa region' section below). This pest will be further assessed as the review progresses. If new information about pests and diseases comes to light as the review progresses then this will be considered in the draft report.

Given the above, the risk analysis for dates from the Middle East and North Africa region will be progressed as a review of biosecurity import requirements (non-regulated risk analysis) and not a Biosecurity Import Risk Analysis (BIRA), consistent with the *Biosecurity Import Risk Analysis Guidelines 2016*. Specific criteria must be met in order for a BIRA to be conducted. These criteria are:

- relevant risk management measures have not been established; or
- relevant risk management measures for a similar good and disease/ pest combination do exist, but the likelihood and/or consequences of entry, establishment or spread of diseases or pests could differ significantly from those previously assessed.

In this case, fresh dates from the Middle East and North Africa region do not meet the above criteria. A rigorous risk analysis process, using the best available scientific information, will be applied to this review.

#### *Preliminary assessment of dates from the Middle East and North Africa region*

A preliminary analysis of pests associated with fresh dates has revealed some pests of concern. Arthropod pests of concern include peach fruit fly (*Bactrocera zonata*), Mediterranean fruit fly (*Ceratitis capitata*), date mites (*Eutetranychus palmatus* and *Oligonychus afrasiaticus*), mealybugs (*Pseudococcus cryptus* and *Planococcus ficus*), greater date moth (*Aphomia sabella*), lesser date moth (*B. amydraula*) and the pomegranate butterfly (*Virachola livia*).

Risk management measures have been established for all these pests or pest groups, except for the lesser date moth (*B. amydraula*). The department considers that the biology and behaviour of pests associated with fresh dates from the Middle East and North Africa region will not differ significantly

from those in previous assessments. A preliminary pest risk assessment for the lesser date moth has been carried out, and has found that:

- The likelihood of entry, establishment or spread is very low, and
- The likely consequences of entry, establishment or spread are low.

This gives an unrestricted risk estimate below Australia’s Appropriate Level of Protection (ALOP), and therefore this pest is not likely to require any risk management measures. Following further analysis, a pest risk assessment for the lesser date moth will be included as part of the draft report.

Possible risk management measures for all pests identified so far include cold treatment, fumigation, area freedom and visual inspection.

*Date industry in the Middle East and North Africa Region*

Date palms have been grown in the Middle East and North Africa region for centuries and are of cultural and religious significance for many people. Date production in the region is concentrated around open field production sites.

The Middle East and North Africa region is the main date producing region of the world and, as shown in Table 1, in 2013 (the most recent data available) all 10 of the world’s largest producers were located in this region.

While there is some variation across the region, the primary season for harvesting dates is between June and December.

The current key markets for dates from the Middle East and North Africa region are India, China and the European Union which import large amounts of dates (fresh and dried) each year.

*Australian date imports*

Australia currently permits the import of fresh dates from the USA (California), as well as dried or semi-dried dates from all countries. Import conditions for these goods can be found in the Australian Government Department of Agriculture and Water Resources Biosecurity import conditions database (BICON) at [bicon.agriculture.gov.au/BiconWeb4.0](http://bicon.agriculture.gov.au/BiconWeb4.0). Fresh date imports from the USA (California) and dried and semi-dried date imports from all countries have been allowed for over 30 years. Currently importation of dried and semi-dried dates occurs year-round. In 2015, 24 countries exported fresh or

**Table 1.** Date production (metric tonnes) by the top ten date producing countries in 2013

Country	Production (metric tonnes)
Egypt	1 501 799
Iran	1 083 720
Saudi Arabia	1 065 032
Algeria	848 199
Iraq	676 111
Pakistan	526 749
Oman	269 000
United Arab Emirates	245 000
Tunisia	195 000
Libya	174 040

Source: FAOSTAT

dried dates to Australia, however, over three quarters of the volume of these imports were from just three countries – Iran, Turkey and the USA. Fourteen countries in the Middle East and North Africa region have exported dried or semi-dried dates to Australia at least once in the past three years. As shown in Table 2 the volumes of imports into Australia from these countries have fluctuated over the past three years.

**Table 2.** Quantity (metric tonnes) of dates imported into Australia from countries included in this analysis in 2013-2015.

Country	2013 Imported quantity (metric tonnes)	2014 Imported quantity (metric tonnes)	2015 Imported quantity (metric tonnes)
Iran	2 605	3 696	3 661
Turkey	1 232	1 932	1 855
Pakistan	635	454	459
United Arab Emirates	316	359	442
Tunisia	217	210	194
Israel	103	109	145
Saudi Arabia	34	75	83
Lebanon	50	55	82
Oman	1	0	23
Algeria	10	0	12
Egypt	22	22	9
Syria	15	0	0
Jordan	1	5	0
Iraq	0	18	0

Source: International Trade Centre Comtrade with analysis by Market Coordination and Strategy within the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources

### *Date industry in Australia*

The Australian date industry is currently small, with less than 25 growers and approximately only 50 hectares of date plantation (0.005 per cent of global date production area). Because the industry is in its early stages, domestic production is minimal, with only an estimated 13 tonnes of dates produced in 2011 (approximately 0.0002 per cent of global date production). The industry exported 205kg of fresh dates in 2014-15 with no exports occurring in 2015-16.

Ideal date growing climates are characterised by long, hot, dry summers and minimal summer rainfall, conditions available over much of Australia. This is reflected in the broad geographic distribution of Australian date growing areas, with dates being grown in all Australian states and territories with the exception of Tasmania and the ACT. The majority of production is centred in South Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. Varieties grown in Australia are all introduced, and are predominantly sourced from the Middle East.

The Australian date industry has its harvesting period between February and April, although it can extend into June. As a result, the proposed imports would be largely counter seasonal to the Australian harvest period.

#### *Trade between Australia and the Middle East and North Africa region*

Australia is a net exporter to Egypt, UAE, Iraq and Tunisia of agricultural (including fisheries and forestry) products. In 2014 the agricultural trade with Egypt was worth \$359 million in exports (mainly pulses, wheat and wool) and \$7.5 million in imports. The UAE also represents a large trading market for agricultural products, with 2014 trade of agricultural products worth \$818 million in exports (mainly sheep meat, rape/ colza and beef) and \$24 million in imports. Iraq and Tunisia are smaller markets with 2014 agricultural exports to Iraq valued at \$270 million, with negligible imports occurring – 2015 exports to Tunisia were valued at \$7.2 million and imports at \$4.4 million.

#### *Next steps*

The department will undertake a scientific analysis of the risks of importing fresh dates from the Middle East and North Africa region and recommend risk management measures if required. Department staff will liaise with industry representatives and relevant State and Territory agriculture authorities to gather stakeholder input to ensure the department has all available scientific information relevant to this analysis.

These findings will be published in a draft report around mid 2018. Stakeholders will be invited to comment on the draft report during a 60 calendar day consultation period. The department will consider stakeholder comments in the development of the final report.

The department will share information and answer questions relating to this review at any time during the process. New scientific information will also be considered at any time.