

Public-Private Collaborations amidst an Emergency Plant Disease Outbreak: The Australian Experience with Panama Disease

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Abstract

The past decade has seen a steady transition from a framework where the state has been the provider of production-oriented agricultural services to a “user pays” philosophy that emphasises the role of the private sector in the provision of these services—even in agricultural biosecurity, which has been historically considered a public good. This paper analyzes the contours of public-private collaborations in agricultural biosecurity services in the context of an emergency outbreak of Panama disease Tropical Race 4. Does the transition to a market- and industry-led approach shift perceptions on who should bear the burden of addressing risks of Panama disease and to what extent does it influence risk decisions taken by the different actors and stakeholders during an agricultural biosecurity emergency? Using data from field work carried out primarily in Brisbane, Australia, in July 2015, as well as a review and content analysis of documents (e.g., policy briefs) obtained from the Australian government instrumentalities and research organizations, some themes emerge. First, while Australia’s plant disease strategy clearly shows coordination, there are still gaps in service delivery such as delayed response time. Second, the industry-driven R&D system still navigates tensions between responding to the direct and immediate needs of the industry and supporting more long-term and explorative research trajectories. Third, while there appears to be a greater trust in industry than in government in rapid emergency response, both the growers and the peak industry body want more, not less, government biosecurity regulation.