



Steve Fielding **Family First** Senator for Victoria



Senator Steve Fielding
Leader of the FAMILY FIRST Party
FAMILY FIRST Senator for Victoria

Question Without Notice: Apple Industry

16 August 2007

Senator FIELDING (2.35 p.m.)—My question is to the Minister representing the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Senator Abetz. Minister, the government has decided to import apples from New Zealand, which has been ravaged by the bacterial disease fire blight.

Australian growers want to make sure inspection regimes in New Zealand and Australia are up to scratch to reduce the threat of fire blight. But the Australian government has refused to release that information, which means growers have no way of knowing whether inspection is adequate.

Minister, given that our \$4.5 billion apple and pear industry and the livelihoods of thousands of farmers are at stake, why is the government refusing to release information on the inspection regimes? Is the government afraid that the industry will find the procedure inadequate to protect Australia from fire blight?

The PRESIDENT—Order! Before I call Senator Abetz, I remind Senator Fielding that your question should be addressed through the chair, not to the minister.

Senator ABETZ—As a general comment, I say to the honourable senator that Australia's approach to import risk assessments is always based on the science. The science has to drive this, and sometimes it is very frustrating for players who want to have a say in this to nail down their arguments in scientific terms—that is what I invited people to do in another area of my portfolio, fisheries, in relation to the prawn import risk assessment. What drives Biosecurity Australia and others is the science and that is what we, as a government, are going to rely on.

In relation to the potential import of New Zealand apples, I indicate to the Senate that the final import risk assessment was issued by Biosecurity Australia on 30 November 2006. Australia's Director of Quarantine has subsequently determined a quarantine policy consistent with the requirements of the Quarantine Act 1908 that requires New Zealand to comply with very strict quarantine conditions before apples can be imported into Australia. It is likely to take some time before New Zealand apples might be imported.

The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service is now working with its New Zealand counterpart to ensure that New Zealand develops detailed operational arrangements that will comply with Australia's quarantine requirements as specified in the import risk assessment. We cannot allow the threat—and this is very important—of a World Trade Organisation dispute action to deter us from making an appropriately thorough assessment of these operational arrangements.

On that point, I indicate to the senator that we are, quite rightly, as is New Zealand, signed up to the World Trade Organisation. New Zealand growers on the other side of the Tasman are threatening to take Australia to the World Trade Organisation because we are being too tough. On the other hand—surprise, surprise!—apples growers in Australia are saying, 'We're being too soft.' Chances are the science is in fact somewhere in the middle. That is what the scientists have advised us as a government and that is what we are working through.

I say to anybody that has issues in relation to import risk assessments: if we do not get the science right that can withstand a challenge in the World Trade Organisation, then we will not be the masters of our own destiny and the parameters that might be imposed by the World Trade Organisation will become the rules that have to be abided by. This is a two-edged sword for anybody that wants us to take action which goes above and beyond the science.

Simply, New Zealand growers are saying we are being too tough; domestic growers are saying we are being too soft. It positions us as a government quite comfortably in the middle—not for any political reason, I hasten to add, but simply based on the science. Unless Senator Fielding has some scientific evidence to offer—and if he does, he should have provided that to the committee investigating this—I suggest he and anybody else not seek to play politics with what is a very sensitive issue.

Senator FIELDING—Mr President, I have a supplementary question. The Australian government's inspection process relies on the human eye, which means there is room for error. The apple and pear industry has requested the government trial these inspections on its own orchards with artificial fire blight specs to test whether this method is efficient. How effective do you think you

would be in finding a fire blight spot on an apple like this one in an orchard full of apples? Will the Australian government agree to test the efficiency of Australia's inspection methods and prove its claims that it is committed to protecting Australian farmers?

The PRESIDENT—Order! Senator Fielding, I suggest you read standing orders very carefully before you produce an exhibit in the chamber.

Senator ABETZ—They say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and I know that the soon-to-be expelled member for Franklin, Harry Quick, pulled exactly the same stunt in the other place in displaying an apple some time ago. I simply say that the treatment that will be required of these apples with them being dipped in chlorine et cetera will have a significant impact in relation to that.

If you have scientific issues, I suggest: take it up with Biosecurity Australia. I indicate to the Senate that New Zealand apples will not be allowed into Western Australia. The reason: no effective risk management measures could be identified for the disease apple scab that is not present in Western Australia. That is where the scientists take a very considered scientific approach in relation to apple scab, and those things are important. I invite people to take a rational, considered approach and accept the science. (*Time expired*)