MEDIA RELEASE

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Web to catch exotic plant pests

Plant pests and diseases coming into Australia can now be identified fast and accurately using a web-based diagnostic toolbox, potentially saving Australian agriculture millions in lost production.

Launched yesterday by Mrs Lois Ransom, Australia's Chief Plant Protection Officer, the Plant Biosecurity Toolbox provides a collection of detailed diagnostic information on exotic plant pests that can be used by Australia's diagnostic network to more rapidly and confidently confirm if it is an organism which threatens Australian agriculture.

Developed by the Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) for National Plant Biosecurity, the toolbox includes photographs and details of pests - and the symptoms and damage they cause, and links them to information and instructions on a range of diagnostic tests to confirm the identity of the pest. Early detection and confident identification mean that immediate steps can be taken to minimise the risk or impact of incursion.

"To date, identifying exotic pests has presented real challenges - particularly for plant health workers and others in regional and remote locations without access to specialist advice", Dr Gary Kong, researcher with the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, and Plant Biosecurity Toolbox Project Leader for the CRC.

"For many on the front line, the main resource used to find information about exotic pests has been 'Google' or, for help in identifying a pest, they quiz their own networks or send a photo to an expert somewhere in the country," he said.

"The photo might then be passed around in an effort to find somebody with relevant knowledge. This takes time, and testing is still required to confirm the pest. This might take a week or longer - and by then it could be too late to prevent an outbreak."

The Plant Biosecurity Toolbox now provides an encyclopaedia of online information to support rapid diagnosis.

"This improved responsiveness will result in a better chance of containment and eradication of pests and diseases, potentially averting large losses to a number of agricultural industries," Dr Kong said.

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Contact: Kate Scott, Communications Manager - Cooperative Research Centre for National Plant Biosecurity
email: k.scott@crcplantbiosecurity.com.au tel: 0402 299 611
Interviews: Dr Simon McKirdy, Chief Executive Officer

Also launched yesterday and closely linked to the Toolbox is the Biosecurity Bank, which provides a national online reference collection of DNA samples and clones from agriculturally significant plant pathogens and pests. The samples can be used for the development and validation of diagnostic tests and for biodiversity and genomics research. Through the website, researchers can locate and order samples of interest.

Speaking at the launch at Melbourne's Immigration Museum, Mrs Lois Ransom said that with plant pest and disease incursions costing the nation in lost production, eradication responses and quarantine regulation, early detection, fast identification and diagnosis are essential in defending our crops and agricultural industries.

"Rapidity of response is our best chance of containing and eradicating plant pests and diseases, and the CRC's unique tools assist us achieving this goal," Mrs Ransom said.

The Plant Biosecurity Toolbox and Biosecurity Bank are the first tools of their kind in the world. They demonstrate Australia's plant health protection standards to world trade partners.

"In today's world where there is a push for greater confidence in our plant health status - including demands for evidence of that status, having access to tools that can help us achieve and document this knowledge is vital for our farmers, the government, agricultural industries and of course, our trading partners," she said.

The Plant Biosecurity Toolbox and Biosecurity Bank are global websites with open access which follow the Australian Sub-committee for Plant Health Diagnostic standards.

Plant Biosecurity Toolbox: www.padil.gov.au/pbt
Biosecurity Bank: www.biosecuritybank.com

High resolution photographs are available.

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