

Safeguarding Update

United States Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
Plant Protection and Quarantine



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Safeguarding Implementation—Nearing the Finish

Background

Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ), a program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), is the national plant protection organization of the United States. PPQ's mission is to safeguard agriculture and natural resources from the risks associated with the entry, establishment, or spread of animal and plant pests and noxious weeds. Fulfillment of PPQ's safeguarding role ensures an abundant, high-quality, and varied food supply, strengthens the marketability of U.S. agriculture in domestic and international commerce, and contributes to the preservation of the global environment. PPQ carries out this mission through various means, including the gathering and analysis of pest data; offshore risk management and mitigation; development of quarantines and regulatory requirements; inspection of imported propagative material, pest detection activities; and control and eradication of pests. When the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was established earlier this year, PPQ transferred many of its inspection functions to DHS' Customs and Border Protection (CBP) organization, but retained critical exclusion functions as well. The activities carried out by PPQ and CBP provide layers of protection that form an effective safeguarding continuum.

To ensure that we have the strongest safeguarding system possible, we asked our State counterparts at the National Plant Board (NPB) to review the primary components of the safeguarding system and make recommendations for enhancements. The four interrelated activities we asked them to review were the collection and use of international pest information; the use of permits to manage risk; exclusion of pests; and detection of and response to pests that enter the United States. The NPB put together a 43-member Review Group that included representatives of other Federal agencies, States, industry, academia, and advocacy groups. A PPQ Steering Committee defined the parameters of the review; provided background information and access to employees, sites, and records; and ensured that the group stayed focused on meeting the program's needs. In carrying out the review, they looked at what was working, what wasn't working, and what could be done to strengthen the system. The Review was designed to elicit recommendations to address clearly-defined problems. It was designed to bring a balanced perspective to the myriad challenges we face by including the views of employees, industry, States, academia, and environmental groups. It was designed to be objective.

The Safeguarding Review Report, *Safeguarding America's Plant Resources*, was delivered to the Department in July 1999 with high expectations among our stakeholders and within the program for its implementation. We immediately put a structure in place to evaluate the recommendations in the Review and develop action plans to implement any recommendation that was practical and that would contribute to the mission of safeguarding. The action plans are put through a full vetting process, first among informal peer review groups, then through the PPQ Steering committee. After they have been reviewed by the Steering Committee, the action plans go to PPQ's top management for review, then the plan is posted on the safeguarding website, www.safeguarding.org, where internal and external stakeholders have 2 weeks to comment on the plans. When the comment period is over, the plans are turned over to program personnel for implementation.

The review contained 307 recommendations. Action plans covering 298 have been submitted to the Steering Committee for review. Action plans covering 197 recommendations have been through the entire process and have been turned over to the program for final implementation. The rest continue to be evaluated. We have made substantial progress toward implementing the recommendations in the Safeguarding Review in the 3 years since implementation began.

Continual Change; Continued Relevance

Change has become our constant companion. Whether as a result of the rapid globalization of markets, the introduction of unique pests, or history-changing events such as September 11, 2001, we have a new awareness of the need to be adaptable and flexible in order to succeed. Indeed, events such as September 11 have given us a renewed sense of urgency for early detection of pests potentially tied to bioterrorism, which aligns well with the ongoing mission to prevent the introduction and establishment of invasive species. PPQ employees have met every challenge in recent years with a renewed sense of purpose and energy. They continue to address the critical needs of agriculture and they have expanded their focus to encompass new and critically important needs such as protection against bioterrorism.

In March, 2003, about 2500 PPQ employees were transferred to the newly established CBP organization. Together with counterparts from other former Federal Inspection Service agencies, the transferred PPQ Officers will carry out certain port of entry inspections to safeguard American agriculture and natural resources and to protect the Nation against terrorism under the global mission of DHS. While many of the passenger, conveyance, and cargo inspection functions transferred to DHS, a number of exclusion and secondary exclusion activities remained with PPQ. For example, we will continue to be responsible for inspecting all propagative material entering the United States. We will also identify intercepted pests; perform fumigations; carry out market blitzes and trade compliance activities; promulgate import and export regulations and related policies; and certify agricultural products for exports. In addition, we continue to maintain the Federal pest detection and emergency response capacity for plant pests. This sharing of the agriculture mission is a new paradigm for both agencies that will require continual communication, joint planning, and focused attention to succeed. Both organizations are committed to success. We have been working with our counterparts in CBP to develop specific, mutually beneficial articles to supplement a Memorandum of Agreement that was signed in March 2003 by PPQ and CBP. These articles will help establish appropriate and effective processes for sharing information, communicating regulations and policies, sharing resources, and carrying out other activities to support the shared mission.

PPQ will continue to support DHS and take pride in its accomplishments. We will also continue to be proud of our own accomplishments. PPQ's success in safeguarding was evidenced in its contribution to APHIS receiving the Progressive Farmer Magazine's prestigious "People of the

Year Award” earlier this year. Never before in the long history of the magazine has this award been granted to an entire organization. Past recipients have included such luminaries in agriculture as George Washington Carver. We are proud to be part of an Agency that merits such recognition and we will continue to carry out our mission with the same focus on excellence as we learn to support a shared mission through partnership with our newest cooperator.

We have been slowed, but not derailed in safeguarding implementation by events such as the terrorist attacks on America and the subsequent establishment of the Department of Homeland Security. After the transition, we felt the need to pause and reassess our mission to determine whether the mission was still relevant in today’s world and in the aftermath of the largest Government reorganization since World War II. After much discussion and deliberation, we concluded that our mission and vision remain relevant, only the means of delivery will change. We also continue to believe that the values we identified as necessary components in our workforce are the values that will most help us succeed in facing a very challenging future.

Having reaffirmed the mission, vision, and values, we felt we needed to take a look at the future of the organization. We put together a cross-cutting group of PPQ employees to catalog the work of the future and identify new strategies for carrying out the work. It quickly became clear that we needed to evaluate the skills resident in our workforce and identify what our future human resource needs would be so we could determine training, recruitment, and succession planning needs. We are also reviewing its user fee structure to ensure a continued strong revenue base to support its activities and those of CBP.

As part of our reassessment of current and future needs, we also reviewed every action plan that has been developed as part of the implementation process for the Safeguarding Review. Our review of implementation activities was done with a view to ensuring that they continued to be relevant in light of the reorganization. Our review resulted in three categories of action plan: (1) those that pertained to an activity that is now solely carried out by DHS; (2) those that must now be carried out jointly by PPQ and DHS; and (3) those that continue to be the primary responsibility of PPQ. Most of the action plans we reviewed fell into category 3 and remain the primary responsibility of PPQ to carry out. Only 6 are considered to be a shared responsibility and 13 are solely in the purview of DHS. The latter group is largely comprised of recommendations around staffing and deployment of resources. As we continue to review new action plans, we will evaluate them through a DHS filter to ensure we are laying a foundation for success by both agencies.

From Planning to Progress

Implementation planning is nearly complete and practical implementation continues. We know what remains with PPQ and what must be carried forward by CBP if they deem it relevant to their mission. We know what we must partner with CBP on and we are establishing firm foundations for that partnership. What of accomplishment? In the first year of implementation, we addressed foundational recommendations—staffing, revenue, training, organizational structure, and strategic planning issues. In the second year, we built on those actions and began to address issues such as technology, methods development, risk assessment, communications, and pest detection and emergency response strategies. In the third year of implementation, we continue to build on previous actions in these areas and have begun to turn our focus further outward to offshore mitigation and the documentation of international movements of pests, commodities, and other risk material.

Offshore Mitigation

In the area of offshore risk mitigation, we have worked with our counterparts in APHIS International Services (IS) to establish Safeguarding Officer positions overseas. These positions will be filled by people with strong plant health backgrounds. Three locations are currently under consideration for placement—South America, Africa, and the Caribbean. These officers will seek information concerning the pest situation and business and trade trends in their areas. They will look for changes in production, processing, and shipping practices that could contribute to risk or provide the opportunity to mitigate risk at origin. The information they receive will be fed into two systems: the Offshore Pest Information System (OPIS) and the Global Pest and Disease Database (GPDD). Under another name, the GPDD was recommended in the Safeguarding Review as a means to gather known information about pests worldwide so the information can be used by risk assessors and risk mitigators in decisionmaking. PPQ's Center for Plant Health Science and Technology has established the GPDD and has begun populating it with pest lists developed at our request by the various professional societies. Over time, the GPDD will be linked to other important databases so that information is easily obtained by decisionmakers through one gateway.

The OPIS is a real-time system for identifying imminent risks to U.S. agriculture based on knowledge about a pest, its pathway and the potential for establishment in the United States. The system is the repository for information gathered by the IS Safeguarding Officers as well as other sources. An information coordinator (the International Pest Information Coordinator recommended in the Review) works with an Exotic Pest Working Group to evaluate the information and determine where to route it for action. A prototype system is up and running and has been shown to our counterparts at CBP since one of the proposed products from this system will be alerts that can be issued to port personnel to intensify inspection of certain commodities, articles, or conveyances. CBP was very receptive to the system. Information gathered in the OPIS will be archived in the GPDD.

Emergency Response

We have also been working hard to update and expand our emergency program manuals to ensure that we have response plans in place for those pests that we may be most vulnerable to. Primary attention is being given to pests on the select agent list—a list created as a result of the Agriculture Bioterrorism Act that imposes special restrictions on the possession or use of certain organisms. In addition to updating and expanding emergency response plans, we are working to implement the incident command system (ICS) as an emergency response tool. The White House, through the Office of Homeland Security, is directing the use of ICS by all responding agencies to ensure that Federal response is effective, consistent, and well supported. Over the next couple of years, we will also be working with cooperators to align Federal and State emergency response systems for plant health.

Pest Detection

The Safeguarding Review made numerous recommendations to strengthen our pest detection capacity and mechanisms. We have put in place the organizational structure recommended in the Review and we continue to work to refine priorities and ensure appropriate distribution of detection funds to create the most effective pest detection net that we can. In an effort to improve data collection from pest survey activities, we worked with the University of Nebraska to develop a data entry system that uses hand-held devices coupled with GPS technology to feed accurate information directly into the National Agricultural Pest Information System. The Safeguarding Review recommended the use of hand-held technology for port activities; this applies the same recommendation to another activity and improves our data entry procedures. To maximize the

effectiveness of pest detection programs, numerous CPHST projects are addressing ways to prioritize detection initiatives and developing new methodologies for pest detection. CPHST scientists are introducing powerful molecular diagnostic tools for the identification of pests and pathogens. CPHST has under development a dozen LUCID pest identification keys to enable better identification of quarantine pests for PPQ and stakeholders.

Risk Assessments

We continued our progress with addressing risk assessment needs, increasing staffing and focusing attention on pathways in addition to the more traditional commodity risk assessments. This year, we conducted a pathway assessment for the Mexican Border. The recommendations from this assessment are currently being reviewed by staff and we anticipate regulatory, policy, and operational changes to certain activities carried out both by PPQ and CBP. Because we must now work across organizations, it is important to develop a hand-off process that is effective and efficient and that is what we are doing with this assessment.

We anticipate the completion of a transit risk assessment shortly. That assessment will help us make additional decisions on managing risk in transit activities. In the meantime, we have implemented several of the risk management recommendations in the Safeguarding Review. For example, a documentation system was created at the Port of Laredo that has been extended to other land border ports. The so-called “green sheet” system documents the entry and exit of transit shipments and serves to alert personnel when shipments do not exit at the designated port within the specified timeframe. PPQ personnel also began experimenting with the use of electronic seals for shipments running between the ports of Seattle and Blaine, Washington. The success of this project led to its expansion to Laredo, Texas.

Permits and Certification

We continue to make progress with improvements in the overall permit system. “E-Permits,” an electronic permit application system is being implemented in stages to increase efficiency. We have established a process to handle customer concerns more effectively as well. Similar automation efforts are occurring with the export certification system. The Permit staff also sought and obtained ISO 9000 certification for permit activities, which reflects their adherence to sound business practices based on internationally recognized standards.

Harmonization of Quarantines

The Safeguarding Review recommended that we take a serious look at Federal quarantines for plants and commodities to make sure our approach to risk is harmonized in each. Under current quarantine authorities, plants may enter the United States subject to inspection at the port of entry unless there are specific regulations in place to address a known risk. On the other hand, fruit and vegetable commodities are not enterable unless a risk assessment has been conducted and appropriate risk mitigations can be put in place. From a risk standpoint, these approaches are not consistent, yet it would be extremely difficult and disruptive to suddenly invoke a totally restrictive quarantine approach for plants. Nonetheless, we recognize that we must address the risks associated with propagative material more directly if we hope to safeguard agriculture and natural resources. We have, therefore, been evaluating alternative approaches such as clean stock programs and accreditation and certification programs as a means to address risk. We will be exploring these avenues more thoroughly in the coming year.

Enforcement and Penalties

One of the striking elements of the Safeguarding Review was the consensus around the need to strengthen enforcement and penalty systems. Having obtained passage of the Plant Protection Act in 2000, we gained a new enforcement tool in the form of significantly increased penalty authority. We crafted new guidelines for applying those penalties and embarked on a comprehensive training program for new and existing employees before putting the new penalties in place. We updated manuals and compliance agreements, and issued press releases and other educational material to the media and potentially affected parties. We established a database for tracking penalties and identified alternative ways for travelers to pay spot settlements at ports of entry. It was a complete approach to operational change and the result was smooth implementation of the new penalty system. Word is getting out to the traveling public and others that we are serious about compliance. Now that DHS has been established, their CBP employees will be issuing spot settlements on our behalf and documenting other alleged violation cases for investigation by APHIS and USDA officials. This transition has also occurred seamlessly. To ensure that the penalty guidelines are appropriate and effective and employees have the right tools to apply the guidelines, we have just begun a review of the system that was put in place a year ago. We will make any adjustments necessary and will continue to periodically review the guidelines to keep them current and effective.

Internal Communications

Nothing we undertake can succeed unless we are communicating effectively within our own organization. We recognize the difficulty of communicating in a large organization that is spread throughout the country. The challenge will be even greater as we learn to collaborate across agencies with DHS. The Safeguarding Review recommended that we communicate better horizontally and vertically with port personnel. We took that recommendation a step further and evaluated internal communication throughout PPQ. We asked a consultant with experience working with Government agencies and expertise in organizational communication and organizational development to look at our procedures and make recommendations. Late last year, they gave us a report evaluating our current situation and recommending improvements in a variety of areas. They took into consideration the complexity that will be added by the establishment of DHS. We, in turn, have asked an employee advisory group to help prioritize those recommendations and plan actions steps to be taken to implement them. These efforts will be continued in the coming year with a view toward strengthening our ability to communicate throughout the organization and with CBP.

Stakeholder Collaboration

PPQ enjoys a strong relationship with cooperators and other stakeholders. While we will not always be in concert on issues, we derive mutual benefit from the ongoing dialog that we have and the information we receive from all sources. PPQ continues to work toward automation of its stakeholder registry, a web-based list of stakeholders that catalogs contact information and interests so that we can tailor communications to those with the greatest interest. In addition, PPQ is planning a stakeholder meeting for December 2003 in Washington, DC, to provide an opportunity for dialog and feedback on current issues and concerns. We believe these efforts to reach out to our stakeholder base allow us to create stronger programs and take more informed regulatory measures.

Recognition

Whether as a result of a specific recommendation in the Safeguarding Review or because of individual initiative, many improvements have been made in PPQ's safeguarding system. To recognize these initiatives and the people behind them, we instituted a PPQ Deputy Administrator's Safeguarding Award. The award recognizes contributions to safeguarding that involve new initiatives or enhancements to existing activities and that reflect the principles or recommendations contained in the Safeguarding Review. The first two recipients of the Safeguarding Award were recognized for the improvements they made in tracking systems, both documentary and electronic, for transit shipments. The second set of award nominations are currently under review. The Award will be given several times a year. Employees in PPQ and CBP are eligible.

Need for Vigilance: Nurturing the Future

We in PPQ are proud of the progress we have made in implementing the Safeguarding Review and strengthening our safeguarding system. Most of the overarching recommendations have been implemented and the guiding principles in the Review have been honored. There are, nonetheless, a number of recommendations dealing with very specific issues that still need to be completed. We are committed to successful completion of this process. We are also committed to continual evaluation of the quality of our work and the effectiveness of our actions. We do not believe that success ends with the completion of the last recommendation. Success is reflected in a constant striving for excellence. We have new challenges to face and new paradigms to adjust to and there will always be new challenges and new paradigms. It is the nature of the world we live in. PPQ's history has been one of adaptation and innovation and I am confident that will continue as we look toward the future. PPQ and all of its stakeholders must remain vigilant for future trends and emerging risks and we must continue to work together to position ourselves for a successful future.

Visit the Safeguarding Website at: <http://www.safeguarding.org>