Speaker 1:

Welcome to Urban Plant Health Network's podcast series, The Good, The Bad and The Bug-ly.

Drew Radford:

Plants make up most of our food. They're essential for our health, the environment and the economy.

So, everyone pretty much has a vested interest in the health of plants. A huge part of helping our plants stay healthy is keeping them free of exotic pests and diseases. If these can be spotted and reported earlier on in urban areas, then hopefully their spread can be stopped to rural areas, the homeland of horticultural and agricultural industries.

The person who is tasked with keeping the state's plants healthy and safe from exotic pests and diseases is Dr. Rosa Crnov. She's Victoria's Chief Plant Health Officer. To find out what that entails, she joins me now in the Urban Plant Health Network studio. Dr. Crnov, thanks for your time.

Dr Rosa Crnov:

Thank you.

Drew Radford:

Let's start broadly. What actually is the role of the Chief Plant Health Officer?

Dr Rosa Crnov:

My team and I actively exist so that we can keep exotic plant pests and diseases and invasive species out of the state of Victoria. So that's essentially why we're here. We do a lot of supporting work in that space where we have a sciencey technical group who assess all the possible plant pests that could come into the state and do risk assessments, provide scientific advice about various pests and diseases.

We've got a response team who are there in case we do get exotic pests being found in the state and they go out and respond and do all that first responder work, including tracing and surveillance and all that sort of thing.

We have preparedness people who do all that pre-thinking about, well, what will we do when we do get an exotic pest detection in the state? So, they do the planning and thinking they develop contingency plans to support that work.

Then we've also got a trade and market access team who do all the thinking about, well, what is going to happen if we get this exotic pest here in the state? What are the impacts going to be on our plant industries and for their trade and market access?

Then of course, we've got operations people as well. So, when it is in full swing and we are responding to an exotic pest, it's all hands-on deck. They're out in the field, working with stakeholders, doing all the delimitation and all the interviews and tracing just so that we can try and figure where did the pests come from and where has it gone.

Every state and territory as well as the Commonwealth has a Chief Plant Health Officer. So, there are seven of us nationally, and we meet regularly to discuss various issues of national interest and to resolve them together.

Drew Radford:

Your role though is a big role because it's about protecting Victoria in terms of the state is the largest exporter of food and fibre products in the country. So, you've got a lot of flow on areas to basically protect.

Dr Rosa Crnov:

We absolutely do. Half of Australia's horticultural products come out of Victoria. They're exported from our state. So, we're here to support those plant industries to trade, to send their goods, not just internationally, but also domestically.

So, it's in our interests to ensure that we keep exotic pests out of the state and in our interests to ensure that if we do get a detection of an exotic pest, that we're onto it really quickly. We can respond quickly. We protect plant industries. We protect the natural environment as well because exotic pests don't just target plant industries. They could be impacting people's gardens, the natural environment. So we want to protect our plant industries and our natural environment from these exotic pests.

Drew Radford:

I assume that also includes reputational protection then as well.

Dr Rosa Crnov:

Oh, sure. I like to think that Victoria has a very good reputation, not only for biosecurity and response and working well with our affected industries in regard to responding to plant pest. But in terms of international trade, as I said, we have a huge export role to play and we're supported in exports by our Commonwealth partners in the Department of Agriculture, Water, and Environment, to ensure that our industries are meeting the standards and requirements expected of our international training partners.

Drew Radford:

What are some of the biggest pest threats to Victoria at present?

Dr Rosa Crnov:

You'll be pleased to hear that we've done a lot of thinking in this space and we actually have a list of 272 potential pest threats to Victoria.

Now, we obviously can't work on all those pests. So, we then work in this national space where there is a national top 40 plant pest list. So, we know, for example, what the top five and top 10 pests are.

So, at the moment, what's very topical is Brown marmorated stink bug. It is stink bug season from September to May of every year. This little stink bug, it's an issue for us and we're on high alert for the stink bug because it's an insect that likes to feed on a whole range of fruits and vegetables, literally hundreds of different species.

So, it could impact not only our plant industries, but also suburban gardeners. There are 5 million people who live in Melbourne, just the greater Melbourne area and not all of them are gardeners, but even if you go out for a walk in the park, there could be host plants there that this stink bug could like. So, we really do not want to find a stink bug here in the state.

It's called a stink bug because when you squash it, it does produce this really unpleasant odour. Some people describe the smell as smelly socks.

You may not be aware, almost two years ago, two seasons ago, we did have several detections of Brown marmorated stink bug in Victoria. So, we very quickly went out, set up traps in Clayton, Port Melbourne, and Dandenong, set up a bit of a trapping network, and we investigated the sites that they were detected. We did some tracing. We knew where those bugs came from, from imports in shipping containers.

We were supported by the Commonwealth department. We did letter dropping in those suburban areas of Melbourne to thousands of businesses and households, letting them know what was going on, could they report any detections of stinkbug.

We were very lucky. We got on top of it immediately, and we had no further detections beyond those initial detections. So that's a really good news story where we were able to get on top of this early detection quickly. We had the support of stakeholders, of residents and businesses in the area.

So, on high alert there. So, the Commonwealth department does a huge amount of work at our international border, making sure that all those countries importing goods from overseas into Victoria are complying with very strict entry conditions into Australia.

Drew Radford:

You said there's a list of 272. That's a big number. There must be some at the top of that list though, that keep you awake at night occasionally.

Dr Rosa Crnov:

Yes. Yes. There are So stink bug, as I've said, is one. Varroa mite, Varroa mite does concern me. However, we had a really interesting incident. A couple of years ago, an interception of Varroa mite on imported goods at the port of Melbourne. We were very fortunate that with that interception, the goods were coming from the US and they were on a ship bound for the port of Melbourne and the captain of that ship was very well aware of following proper biosecurity processes. So, he contacted our Commonwealth colleagues while that his ship was out at sea to say, "I have a swarm of bees here, on the deck here.", a little concerned about what they are, what they're doing.

So, when that ship birthed at the port of Melbourne in June 2018, our Commonwealth colleagues and the Agriculture Victoria team were there waiting to intercept that ship. We were very quickly able to contain the situation to collect the swarm. We immediately set up a trapping network around the port. We did surveillance with industry and hobby beekeepers for a 12-week period, going out, looking at traps, looking at our sentinel hives, which are indicators of disease incursions of pest incursions at the port. We were able to very quickly determine that while there was Varroa mite in that swarm on that ship, that there were no escapees into our environment.

So that was a really good news story about what happens when you get really early reporting, early response. We get a response team set up very quickly. We engage industry, hobby beekeepers there on board, helping us do the surveillance as part of our rapid state quarantine response team. It went incredibly well, and we were very happy to report that we had no incursion of Varroa mite into Victoria.

Drew Radford:

How can urban gardeners help in ensuring Victoria remains free of exotic plant pests and diseases?

Dr Rosa Crnov:

Well, this is a great opportunity to be an urban and peri-urban gardener across the greater Melbourne area with an interest in pests and diseases.

So, Agriculture Victoria has an Urban Plant Health Network project. We deliver that project with industry and community. We have Nursery & Garden Industry Victoria, AUSVEG, Citrus Australia, and Cesar who are working together with us really closely, as well as community gardeners, sharing information and knowledge about exotic plant pests and diseases.

So, if any of the listeners are interested in being involved, I'd advise that they get onto their website and just literally type in the words Agriculture Victoria and Urban Plant Health Network.

If they do, they'll get a wealth of information there about what the Urban Plant Health Network does. They'll get information about where to find pest and diseases, how to manage them and who to contact if they see something suspicious or an exotic nasty what they might think is an exotic nasty in their gardens. If they do think they've seen something exotic, there is an exotic plant pest hotline that they can call on one 1800 084 881, or they may like to email us at plant.protection@agriculture.vic.gov.au where they can get further advice about what they can do if they suspect that they've got an exotic plant pest in their garden.

Drew Radford:

Fantastic resources there to be able to access. I'm just wondering Dr. Crnov in terms of the current human health epidemic that we're experiencing at the moment, whether that's been slightly beneficial for the work that you do in terms of its brought greater awareness to the broader population about biosecurity in general.

Dr Rosa Crnov:

My view is that it has increased the understanding of biosecurity and the requirement for people to be aware and to report anything that's unusual.

Drew Radford:

Dr. Rosa Crnov, Victoria's Chief Plant Health Officer. You have a very big role in terms of keeping the state secure and pest-free and ensuring large section of the economy keeps on powering forward and people are fed. Thank you ever so much for joining me today in the Urban Plant Health Networks podcast studio.

Dr Rosa Crnov:

Thank you very much too. A pleasure.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for listening to The Good, The Bad and The Bug-ly. For more episodes in this series, find us and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. We would love to hear your feedback, so please leave a comment or rating and share this series with your friends and family.

All information is accurate at the time of release. This podcast was developed for the Urban Plant Health Network.