



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

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Dear Sir/Madam,

Outcome of stakeholder engagement on future quarantine status for tobacco whitefly, *Bemisia tabaci*

I am writing to inform you of the outcome of the policy review that took place for *Bemisia tabaci* in 2023. This follows consideration of all responses received, by Defra and Devolved Governments.

Background

Bemisia tabaci, tobacco whitefly, is a quarantine pest in GB and Northern Ireland. It can infest a wide range of edible and ornamental crops. Its most important impact is as a vector of numerous plant viruses, particularly in tomatoes and cucumbers. A stakeholder engagement on the future status of *Bemisia tabaci* was carried out for 12 weeks finishing in December 2023. A report was provided summarising the status of *B. tabaci* in the UK, its history as a quarantine organism, interception data and an assessment of the projected impacts of different policy options. An indicative analysis of the costs and benefits of different policy options was also provided. The four different policy options presented were:

- Option 1. Maintaining the status quo
- Option 2. Strengthening – greater controls on plant movements
- Option 3. Redesignate as a Regulated Non-Quarantine Pest (RNQP) – a partial deregulation, removing measures on plant products
- Option 4. Remove requirements except those on vectoring of quarantine virus species - a major relaxation

A summary of the responses to the stakeholder engagement is provided in Annex A with responses to specific questions provided in Annex B.



Outcome

The stakeholder engagement responses were summarised and considered by Defra and Devolved Governments. We concluded that **maintaining the status quo (Option 1)** should be pursued in order to reduce current and future risks from this pest and to avoid additional barriers to exports. This decision reflects the views of some stakeholders within the ornamental plant production sector, as well as the tomato growing industry. However, we have also noted views about the practical and financial implications that the policy can have on the ornamental plant industry, in particular for poinsettia growers. In order to reduce some of the impacts on this industry, we will be investigating ways in which government and industry can work together to reduce the risk of outbreaks developing and the consequential costs and also, working in association with stakeholders, identify priorities for research and disseminate best practice.

I would like to thank those who contributed to this process as views expressed have been invaluable in helping to determine this policy position.

Yours faithfully,

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Appendix A: A summary of the stakeholder engagement responses

There were 24 responses to the stakeholder engagement. Twelve of the responses were from businesses identified as being poinsettia growers in the UK and the poinsettia growers' group. Another four responses were from UK ornamental growers that were not identified to be poinsettia growers and the associated growers group. There were five responses from organisations or businesses that import / export plants (for propagation and finished plants) or plant products to the UK. In addition, there was a response from the British Tomato Growers Association (BTGA), one from the NFU and from Fera Science Ltd. Within the fresh produce sector, some of the businesses that suffer the greatest losses in relation to *B. tabaci* are those that import small consignments of tropical produce such as *Corchorus*. Views from this sector have not been received.

Although, the number of stakeholders indicating a preference for each option have been added up in the subsequent paragraph, making an evaluation purely on the number of stakeholders preferring each option would not be representative of industry size. Based upon Horticultural Statistics data, the two industry sectors mainly affected by the policy for *B. tabaci* (ornamentals and protected salad production) are of similar size in terms of income generated and so could be considered to have a similar stake in the policy. The tomato growers submitted one united response, and 19 of the 24 responses were linked to ornamental plants.

In terms of the selected policy preference, the most popular proposed policy, with ten first choice preferences was to change to only taking action versus *B. tabaci* vectored viruses (Option 4). Seven of the twelve responses from poinsettia growers expressed a preference for this option along with two of the other four responses for ornamental growers who don't specialise in poinsettias. The second most popular option numerically with eight first choice preferences was to stick with the status quo (Option 1). The status quo was the favoured option for three poinsettia growers, two other ornamental plant growers, Fera Science Ltd, the NFU and the BTGA (who were also in favour of Option 2). Six respondents favoured Option 3 - making *B. tabaci* an RNQP. These included four from the importing / exporting companies (two from the same company) and two UK poinsettia growers. Option 3 also had more second choice votes (nine) than any other option. The option of strengthening measures against *B. tabaci* was only favoured by the BTGA (joint first) and the least favoured option of 17 of the 20 respondents who gave a least favoured option.

To sum up from industry sectors, the BTGA preferred either a strengthening of current policy or the status quo, whereas for the ornamental plant production industry the most popular policy was Option 4 (a major relaxation) with others from the ornamental industry preferring either Option 1 (status quo) or Option 3 (RNQP status).

Appendix B: Replies to questions raised in the stakeholder engagement

There needs to be a tolerance for Bemisia tabaci in finished plants and controls should be varied by crop type and stage [from two poinsettia growers]

This would be possible if *B. tabaci* was made a RNQP (Option 3) but while it is a quarantine pest, this flexibility is not possible.

There is also a limited understanding of the likelihood of B. tabaci spreading naturally between protected ornamental and protected edible nurseries sited near to each other (NFU). The risk of spread from ornamental production sites to protected edible crops is low [two poinsettia growers]. In the UK, there are 55ha of tomato [crops] within 400m of ornamental glasshouses - BTGA

As described in the stakeholder engagement report, there is a lot of uncertainty about the risk of *B. tabaci* spreading between glasshouses in the UK climate, some of this will relate to the proximity of infested and uninfested sites. As *B. tabaci* is a quarantine pest, it would not be possible to investigate this under field conditions in the UK.

It is apparent from the review of the evidence by Defra that there has been very little study of B. tabaci - NFU

Internationally there have been a lot of studies on *B. tabaci*. Defra has funded the following research projects:

Title	Start Date	End Date
Efficacy testing of alternative products for the control of <i>Bemisia tabaci</i>	Jan-21	Mar-21
Further investigation into control options for <i>Bemisia tabaci</i>	Oct-21	Mar-22
PH0147T - The effect of temperate climate on epidemiology of gemini viruses and the differentiation of <i>B. tabaci</i> using	Mar 1998	Oct 2001
PH0157 - Integrated control, containment and eradication of the quarantine pest <i>Bemisia tabaci</i> in UK glasshouses	Sep 1999	Mar 2002
PH0180 - Identification of early nymphal instars of <i>Bemisia tabaci</i> and other whitefly species moving in plant trade	Apr 2001	Mar 2004
PH0405 - Efficacy tests for <i>Bemisia tabaci</i> on poinsettia cuttings	Aug 2005	Mar 2006
PH0440 - A modular approach to integrate control of <i>Bemisia tabaci</i>	Aug 2010	Sep 2013

The NFU would suggest that Defra should have acquired an up to date understanding of the concerns of growers across the industry, before proposing a series of future policy options.

Informal meetings were held with industry representatives before the policy options were developed and published.

Four options have been proposed, which offer opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of ways forward (NFU)

Option two (strengthening measures) and Option 4 (only taking action in relation to virus risk) presented opposite ends of a spectrum, however Option 3 (RNQP) would have represented partial deregulation whilst maintaining controls on high risk plants for planting.

NFU suggests that Defra should

- *continue to take action to ensure plant health requirements are abided in exporting countries – to prevent problems at source.*

To this end, there was an audit of the phytosanitary system of the Netherlands in 2023 in relation to *B. tabaci*

- *ensure the GB Plant Health service resources are available to inspect imported high risk plant material promptly.*

Since 30 April, all inspections of imported plants have been moved to Border Control Posts and Control points.

- *work more closely with growers to understand problems and refine procedures.*

Defra will continue to work with grower / grower representatives to discuss what changes it is possible to make.

- *ensure Plant Health inspectors apply a consistent, enabling and pragmatic approach to *B. tabaci* control and eradication.*

See above

- *support new R&D work to better understand the risks around *B. tabaci*.*

We will seek views from industry to determine further research priorities

- *work to ensure effective crop protection products are available to control such pests.*

Defra has a history of applying for, and will continue to seek, off label approvals for plant protection products for use against *B. tabaci*.

*The destruction of crops with *B. tabaci* is unnecessary [two poinsettia growers]*

Destruction of infested plants to reduce the spread of the pest may be a more practical control mechanism than the application of insecticides in some circumstances.

The pest is manageable under northwest European conditions (VBN)

There was some evidence published in the stakeholder engagement document that *B. tabaci* can be a problematic pest in the Netherlands

We believe there is already a population of B. tabaci in the UK [plant produce grower / importer and one poinsettia grower]. The potential to spread will increase markedly as our climate inevitably changes. Also risk of overwintering currently in environs to glasshouses which are warmer than ambient temperatures. Especially true where all year-round production takes place' – BTGA

B. tabaci is not well adapted to the UK climate and is not considered capable of establishing outdoors in the UK and there are publications that suggest that it will not be able to establish outdoors in the short to medium term even with climate change.

We need to know the prevalence of viruses in imported plants and intercepted Bemisia tabaci [Fera Science Ltd.]

The practicalities of evaluating virus levels will be investigated

Option 2 would cause end many commercial ornamental crops [three poinsettia growers]

This option had little support in the stakeholder engagement and has been discounted.

Some consideration should be given to what constitutes a batch of plants / what presents a sampling quantity / sampling results are too slow [poinsettia grower]

This can be investigated

'If 50% of the current UK tomato industry became affected, then the cost to industry could be over £68m.' BTGA

The £68m seems to be based on the assumption that if tomato crops became infested with *B. tabaci* all production would end. This seems extremely unlikely. There have been outbreaks in UK crops and phytosanitary measures were implemented, but production continued until the end of the season. Tomatoes are produced across continental Europe and the only statutory measures taken against *B. tabaci* are at the borders.