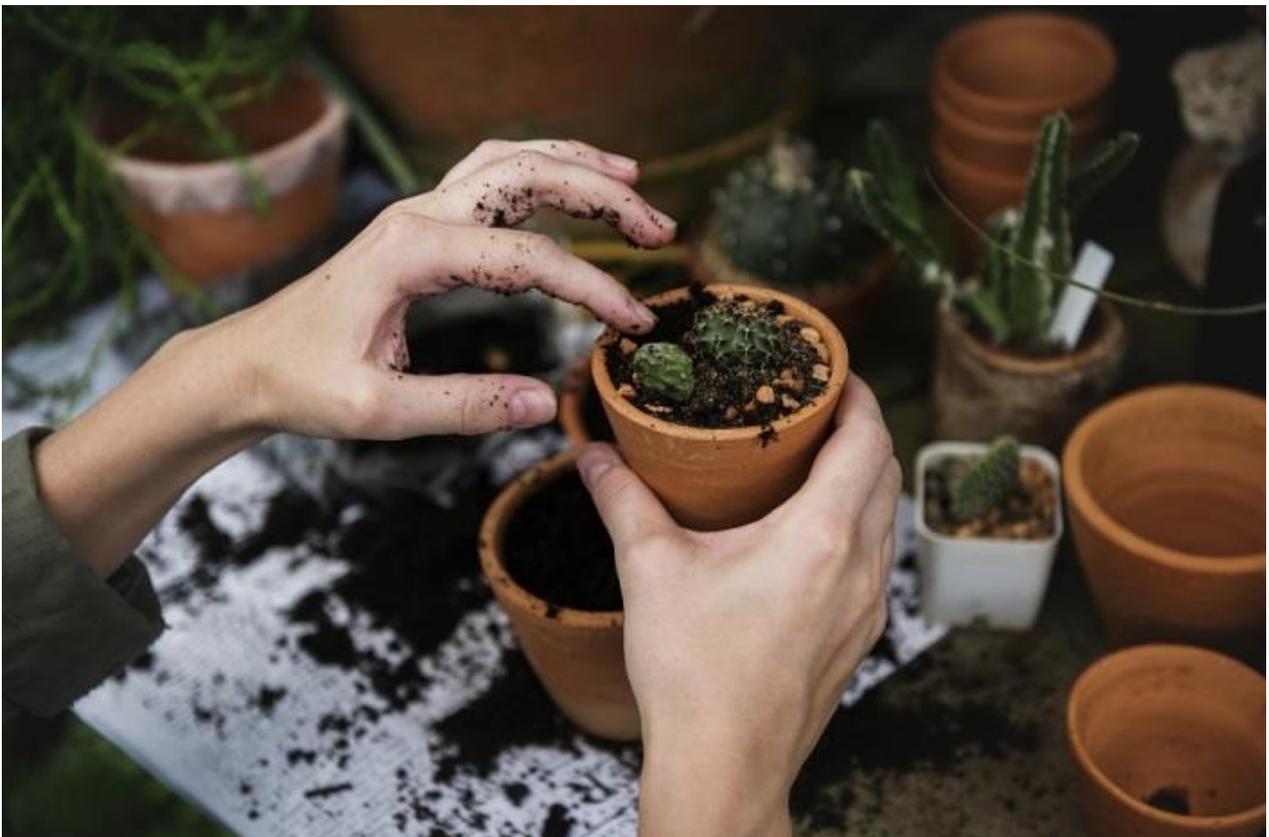




Improving plant biosecurity in the UK

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



Improving plant biosecurity in the UK

In recent years, trees and plants in the United Kingdom have come under threat from diseases introduced from imported and infected plants. The NFWI calls on the Government to implement a mandatory plant certification scheme to assure the public that the plants they buy and the soil and containers in which they are sold have been screened and are infection free.

Proposer's position

The proposer is concerned about the lack of rigorous biosecurity at UK borders and the impact that globalisation in trade and travel has on plants being brought into the country.

What is plant biosecurity?

According to The Forestry Commission and The Animal and Plant Health Agency, 'biosecurity' refers to "a set of precautions that aim to prevent the introduction and spread of harmful organisms. These include non-native tree pests, such as insects, and disease-causing organisms, called pathogens, such as some bacteria and fungi".

These organisms, pests and insects can be spread in a number of ways, including through the transportation of live plants and tree products within and between countries.

Plants are essential to our natural environment and social wellbeing and make a vital contribution towards the food supply and rural economy. To protect plant health, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) sets policy and enforces controls and restrictions on the import, movement and keeping of certain plants, plant pests and other materials such as soil.

The scale of the problem

UK imports of live plants have increased by 71% since 1999. According to the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), there are now more than 1,000 pests and diseases on the UK plant health risk register. The risk of new plant pests and diseases has been linked to the increasing volume and quicker movement of traded plants.

Plant pests and diseases have become more ferocious and persistent in the UK. Many people are aware of diseases such as 'ash dieback' as well as pests such as 'box tree moth' and 'horse chestnut leaf miner', which are causing significant changes to our landscape and horticultural practices. There are fears, for example, that ash dieback could kill half of the UK's ash trees.

However, there are also diseases that may be less well-known among the general public. 'Xylella fastidiosa', for example, is a bacterium that causes damage to a wide range of woody commercial plants such as grapevine, citrus and olive plants, several species of broadleaf trees widely grown in the UK, and many herbaceous plants.

The current situation in the UK

The UK's biosecurity measures are very complex and, as a result of the UK preparing to leave the European Union, the direction of policy in this area is fairly uncertain. The EU's Plant



Health Law, for example, is due to be implemented by Member States by 13 December 2019. The Regulation, among other things, requires *all* plants moving within the EU to have a plant passport that certifies their health status. Plant passports are “an identification label, usually issued by the nursery raising the plant in question, which identifies the grower and origin of the product, and verifies that the plant is eligible to move freely within the EU”.

‘Priority pests’ that pose the greatest risk to the environment and economy will also be subject to enhanced measures. As the UK is expected to leave the EU before this Regulation is due to be implemented, it is unclear how it will be carried through in the UK. However, Lord Gardiner (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity), has confirmed that the Government “will be looking to have this work on our statute book”. Despite this, the Government’s plans are not entirely clear cut, largely because of the amount of uncertainty surrounding Brexit.

The need for greater stringency in the UK’s plant biosecurity measures has been echoed by The Royal Horticultural Society which is calling for the introduction of national and mandatory plant health certification scheme for all UK importers of stock nursery.

In contrast to the system in place for plants traded within the EU, plants traded with countries outside of the EU require a phytosanitary certificate, issued by a national plant protection organisation. Some organisations have raised concerns that post-Brexit, plants traded between the UK and EU could be required to have this certificate, which might entail substantial financial costs for businesses. Others, however, have said that they would support this change as phytosanitary certificates are more rigorous than the system currently in place for trade between the UK and EU.

The proposer of this resolution believes that, whatever the outcome of Brexit negotiations, effective cooperation between EU member states and the UK is essential for the sound implementation of strategies to support plant biosecurity. The importance of continued cooperation was recently emphasised in a report of the EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee, published in October 2018. It stated that “given geographical proximity and the volume of trade and travel between the UK and the EU, continued cooperation is critical to the UK’s future biosecurity”.

There is also a role for the general public in helping to prevent the introduction and spread of tree pests and diseases. Guidance produced by the Forestry Commission and the Animal and Plant Health Agency recommends avoiding bringing any plants or trees back from trips abroad. Private importation is the most likely way that pests such as fuchsia gall mite, which is now widespread in the south-east and causes disfiguration, arrived in the UK. A YouGov survey for the RHS found that 5% of holidaymakers would consider bringing back plants to the UK. The public is also encouraged to report trees that they suspect are in ill-health to the Forestry Commission and, when buying plants online from abroad, check that the seller can provide a phytosanitary certificate.

How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue.

At local and regional levels, members could raise public awareness of the risks to plant health in the UK and the steps that can be taken by individuals to prevent the introduction and spread of pests and diseases.

Nationally, there would be limited opportunities to influence Government due to the complexity and uncertainty surrounding this issue because of Brexit.

Arguments for the resolution

- The resolution fits with the WI's rural roots and history of environmental campaigns.

Arguments against the resolution

- The future direction of policies in this area is complex and very uncertain; does the WI have the expertise to help shape this technical and legal debate?
- As the Government has indicated that it will implement the new EU Plant Health Law which would introduce more stringent plant biosecurity measures, is this the best use of the WI's efforts as there will be limited opportunities to influence Government?

Further information

Report of the EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldeucom/191/191.pdf>

UK Government: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/prevent-the-introduction-and-spread-of-tree-pests-and-diseases>

Video content:

This video by Natural Resources Wales examines the threats to tree health and explains what you can do about plant biosecurity: <http://naturalresourceswales.gov.uk/guidance-and-advice/environmental-topics/woodland-management/tree-health-and-biosecurity/tree-health-in-wales/?lang=en>

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