

Biosecurity planning will benefit from extended data protection

By Mark Ross

New Zealand's economy and environment is constantly at risk of threats from pests and diseases, as demonstrated by Auckland's recent Tau fly incursion. Even with ample investment in biosecurity and pest management, we undoubtedly face threats from increasing numbers of tourists and imported products. Changing weather patterns also have their part to play in this predicament.

The government does a fine job in reducing the risk of new pests entering the country, but the Ministry for Primary Industries concedes that there is no such thing as a zero risk in biosecurity. Without closing borders and wrapping ourselves in a bubble, even the best systems cannot detect or stop every harmful pest.

A rapid response is crucial if an exotic pest is found as it must be eradicated or contained from spreading. Critical to this is finding products that can achieve the desired result. Immediate access to these products is essential to protect our native biodiversity and agricultural production.

The environment and our economy have been harmed by recently-established pests like the Varroa mite, Psa, Theileria and Chilean needle grass which are spreading throughout the country.

The varroa mite spreads a deadly virus which wipes out bee colonies and was one of the main causes of bee loss in New Zealand.

Psa, first identified in Japan in the 1980s, was detected in the Bay of Plenty in November 2010. Since then the disease has spread widely, infecting over 1,600 kiwifruit orchards in New Zealand.

So the limelight is on biosecurity for protecting New Zealand's economy and agricultural production. Both the government and the science community agree that new approaches and improvements to existing tools are needed to protect the country's environment and economy from harmful organisms.

There is a very simple solution. By encouraging companies to research and produce new products, new threats can be managed and harmful pests can be contained from spreading throughout the country. This can be done by extending data protection on innovative products from five to 10 years.

Doing this will aid biosecurity planning. It will also bring products with 'softer' chemistry - or less hazardous properties - to the market. The spin-off is that risks to human health, non-target organisms and the environment will be diminished. Use rates and the number of applications are also reduced, as is the potential for resistance.

Many products with 'softer' more environmentally-friendly chemistry could be introduced into New Zealand to replace other products which, having been reassessed by the Environmental Protection Authority, are no longer available for use or will be removed from the market place in the near future.

An estimated \$50 million per annum is spent on developing innovative products for the agricultural sector. But companies are reluctant to over capitalise in research and development when there is limited or no protection for the end product. With enhanced data protection, this spend would increase.

As a supporter of innovation and research, the government needs to do more to encourage manufacturing companies to develop products to tackle potentially crippling pests and diseases.

Implementing 10 years data protection will enhance the toolbox we have to eradicate harmful organisms by encouraging the introduction of modern, innovative, and potentially lower risk science and health technologies into New Zealand.

- Mark Ross is chief executive of Agcarm, the industry association for companies which manufacture and distribute crop protection and animal health products.