

## Government cut backs to state sector must stop

By Graeme Peters

As an agricultural nation, New Zealand needs innovative, effective and environmentally friendly pest control and animal health products.

A constant flow of new or improved products is essential. They target individual pests and diseases, are safer to use, and less persistent in the environment.

Agricultural compounds are used to treat crops and animals, which mostly end up as food, so they must be regulated by the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI).

Backed by legislation, MPI sets controls on their import, manufacture, sale and use.

Industry accepts regulation as necessary because MPI has an important role in, for example, ensuring that pesticide residues in food are kept far below safe levels, that animal welfare is addressed, and that trade issues are well managed.

The team at MPI that approves the 'registration' of products is called the Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines (ACVM) Group. This focussed and important section is one of two regulatory gatekeepers - the other being the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA).

There is no free ride. Agcarm members, the manufacturers of pesticides and animal health products, pay fees when they lodge an application. The initial fees range from \$382 to \$1720, but MPI also charges annual fees and has a charge out rate at \$153 per hour.

Despite the money on offer, ACVM is struggling to keep up with its workload. Over the years, Agcarm has often heard grumbles about delays, but these have reached a crescendo in the past six months.

Statutory deadlines are not being met, required expertise is lacking, and members report that there is inconsistency in how applications are being treated. A recent survey carried out by the Animal Remedy and Plant Protectant Association (ARPPA) found that only eight percent of 25 respondents were satisfied with processing times for applications. More than 80 percent were not satisfied.

No, MPI staff are not incompetent.

The responsibility instead lies with the focus on wanting more for less from the public service, which leaves government departments without sufficient resourcing.

The so-called Better Public Services Programme was launched in 2012 and was trumpeted as "the next phase in the Government's public sector reforms...squarely focused on getting the system working to deliver better results and improved services for New Zealanders."

Ironically, things started going downhill shortly after this programme began. After restructurings, pay freezes and sinking lids, the result is a creeping disillusionment with working in the state sector.

The government has said that public servants on the 'front line' will not be cut back – which is good news if you are required to have contact with a WINZ office or have a medical emergency.

But there are many public servants who deal with business which are similarly important. ACVM is on the front line, but not in the politically convenient sense.

It's not logical to under resource the group which issues approvals for modern crop protection products and veterinary medicines. These are an essential part of boosting productivity in the agricultural sector.

The government's Business Growth Agenda wants to increase exports to 40 percent of GDP by 2015. Improving productivity of agriculture and horticulture is a key part of this goal.

If higher outputs are expected from farmers, the government needs to increase the resourcing for processing applications.

ACVM needs expertise in areas such as toxicology, veterinary medicine and micro biology. People with these skills are hard to find. When they are, MPI has seemingly not been able to reward them sufficiently to retain them, or they are over worked.

Like any workplace, people need incentives to stay and not having career progression opportunities or sufficient remuneration are causes for dissatisfaction and lack of retention.

There are also significant delays in starting the recruitment process - often taking months to start finding people for vacant jobs.

Another bugbear for industry is that ACVM staff get diverted to other projects such as the Southland swede response which occurred in September last year.

These projects have nothing to do with agricultural compounds and should not be funded from registration fees. There should be no industry subsidy for activities outside areas funded by user pays registrations.

Support is needed in this important area of recruiting and retaining officials and the time is now. With two large regulatory changes on the way, it's clear that if the regulator is not keeping up with the existing workload, there is no hope for the future.

Agcarm has made submissions to the higher ups at MPI, asking them to increase resourcing at the ACVM group.

The response has been encouraging, with MPI saying it is focussed on "strengthening the core".

Agcarm and ARPPA are united on this issue. We will continue to press for MPI to allocate more resources to ACVM so that this vital regulator can do its job.

- Graeme Peters is chief executive of Agcarm, the industry association for crop protection and animal health.