

HTA UK Plant Biosecurity Conference (FERA HQ, York, 30 May 2013)

Horticulture Wales joined more than 150 key industry insiders at a special session staged by FERA (Food and Environment Research Agency), an executive agency of DEFRA, to tackle the threat of pests and diseases to the UK plant industry.

Representatives from nurseries, landscapers, retailers, and non-governmental-organisations joined forces with policy makers to put in place an action plan to protect trees and plants from invasive species such as Chalara (ash dieback). Keynote speakers included DEFRA Chief Plant Health Officer Martin Ward, Environment Minister Lord de Mauley, Dr Joan Webber of Forest Research, HTA Director of Business Development Tim Briercliffe, and Mark Smethurst from DEFRA's Plant Policy Team.

Amongst the issues debated were:

- **The impact of Chalara** – delegates were told that Chalara had been a huge 'wake-up call', with DEFRA admitting it was slow to react to initial outbreaks, with resources focused on other threats such as Phytophthora ramorum and Oak Processionary Moth. The disease was first seen in the UK in 2008-9 but wasn't immediately recognised due to the taxonomic difficulties associated with separating it from a harmless fungus that is almost genetically identical. Infection was revealed to have come from imported plant material, while once present, the infection is almost impossible to eradicate. As soon as 'hard evidence' of an outbreak of Chalara was found, DEFRA unilaterally banned the import of ash trees late in 2012, without waiting for European Union consent.
- **Plans for action** – communication has been an issue, with delegates raising concerns that there was a lack of clarity over the roles and responsibilities of DEFRA and the Forestry Commission. However, it was hoped that the work of the Tree Health and Plant Biosecurity Expert Taskforce, which published its final report in the days prior to the conference, would solve much of this



confusion. Outcomes from the Taskforce's report that were being actioned by government include:

- Immediate work to create a comprehensive pest risk register
 - Developing a contingency action plan to ensure a more efficient response to future outbreaks
 - Introducing controls to ban imports of sweet chestnuts before the next planting season
 - A commitment to take future decisions based on 'soft' evidence without the need for final scientific confirmation
 - Reviewing the Plant Passport system and extending it to all plants
 - More effective communication between government scientists and the industry to raise awareness of future pest issues
 - Evaluate the plant health systems in the United States, Australia and New Zealand to see what, if any, lessons could be learned.
- **Issues with plant imports** – many delegates raised concerns over the continued import of plants that could otherwise be grown in the UK, a trend that leaves the industry vulnerable to the threat of invasive species entering the country. Soil attached to plants was said to be a particularly high risk, especially in cases involving:
- Internet sales, which often go completely under the radar
 - Imported plants in suitcases and the like, which are extremely difficult to detect
 - Large specimens requiring significant amounts of soil
 - Van sales
 - Unscrupulous suppliers, a growing number of whom had scant regard for relevant rules and regulations.



- **How to mitigate these problems** – the conference was told that because of European Union free trade and open market rules, outright banning of imported plants would be virtually impossible. The industry must work together to minimise imports by reducing the benefits to customers of purchasing imported materials – basically, nurseries must meet the needs of their customers for a quality, UK-grown product, but need the support of the wider industry and government to do so. A number of suggestions were put forward to encourage this, including:
- Introducing an industry-wide, properly-audited assurance scheme that showcases businesses that take steps to minimise biosecurity risks, similar to initiatives such as the Red Tractor food assurance system
 - Giving businesses that follow such an assurance scheme advantages in bids for grants and publically-funded projects
 - Improved dialogue across the supply chain to promote enhanced traceability and transparency
 - Clear labelling to demonstrate where products were grown to help customers make an informed purchasing choice
 - Better forward planning of projects to encourage contract growing.

