

Horticulture Impact Assessment Program

BA21003 Case Study

June 2026



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Funding statement:

Horticulture Impact Assessment Program 2024-25 – 2026-27 is funded by Hort Innovation. This multi-industry project is a strategic levy investment in the Hort Innovation Almond, Apple & Pear, Avocado, Banana, Blueberry, Cherry, Citrus, Dried Grape, Lychee, Macadamia, Mango, Melon, Mushroom, Nursery, Olive, Onion, Papaya, Passionfruit, Persimmon, Pineapple, Pistachio, Potato – Fresh, Potato – Processing, Raspberry and Blackberry, Strawberry, Summerfruit, Sweetpotato, Table Grape, Turf, and Vegetable Funds

Publishing details:

ISBN <Hort Innovation to add>

Published and distributed by: Horticulture Innovation Australia Limited
ABN 71 602100149

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141 Walker Street

North Sydney NSW 2060

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www.horticulture.com.au

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BA21003 – Multi Pest Surveillance Banana Pests and Diseases

Containing BBTV in NSW: a grower and director perspective

Table 1 BA21003

Stakeholder	Stephen Spear
Business	- Banana grower since the past 45 years - Director of Australian Banana Grower's Council since 2008-09 and member of the R&D Committee since the introduction of national levy in 2008
Location	Taylor's Arm, NSW

What was the research about?

This multi-phase biosecurity project focused on containing Banana Bunchy Top Virus (BBTV) within established control zones in New South Wales (NSW) and preventing its spread to major production regions, particularly North Queensland. BBTV is the most serious viral disease of bananas. Severely infected plants fail to produce fruit and, if left unmanaged, entire plantations can become infected through the movement of banana aphids that carry and spread the virus.¹

In Australia, the disease is confined to Southeast Queensland and Northern New South Wales, leaving more than 95 per cent of the industry (Far North Queensland, the Bundaberg district, Southern New South Wales zone, Western Australia and Northern Territory) free from the disease.²

The project involved active farm surveillance, grower education, destruction of infected plants, and ongoing monitoring of infection trends.

Over time, the project evolved to increase grower involvement in identifying and destroying infected plants, strengthen collaboration with state biosecurity regulators, and improve reporting on infection trends. It also operated alongside related biosecurity efforts in Queensland addressing Yellow Sigatoka and broader disease preparedness, including TR4 risk mitigation.

In this case study, Stephen Spear, a long-term NSW banana grower and Director of the Australian Banana Growers' Council (ABGC) shares his experience with the project and its importance to the industry.

Stephen's background in the banana industry

Stephen has been growing bananas for 45 years in southern NSW at Taylor's Arm, inland from Macksville.

Stephen has been involved in the banana industry Research and Development (R&D) since the national levy was introduced in July 2008 and has been a Director of the ABGC since 2008-09. During that time, he has been

¹ <https://www.horticulture.com.au/growers/help-your-business-grow/research-reports-publications-fact-sheets-and-more/ba12006/>

² Ibid.

on the R&D committee and has overseen several projects focused on banana biosecurity.

Stephen's involvement in the project

Stephen was involved through a Project Reference Group (PRG) in the earlier phases, representing the ABGC. The PRG provided oversight and grower input into how the project was running. The PRG, however, was dismantled over the course of the project. Through his board role, Stephen reviewed reports, infection data and project milestones, and followed the outcomes of the project closely.

Why is this research important for banana growers and the industry more broadly?

Stephen notes that the importance of this research comes down to containment. If BBTV were to become established in North Queensland, where the majority of Australia's bananas are produced, the consequences would be severe and potentially industry changing. The virus vector is already present across the country, so once the disease enters a major production region it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate. Experiences in parts of the Pacific Islands show how quickly plantations can be devastated when Bunchy Top is not effectively contained.

While it's difficult to quantify the exact economic value of prevention, the potential costs of managing widespread infection in a large production region would be enormous, likely *tens of millions of dollars annually* in chemical control alone and even then, complete control would be unlikely. From that perspective, maintaining the current containment zone in New South Wales is protecting the entire national industry.

Although the affected control zone represents a relatively small proportion of total production, its management safeguards both the large-scale North Queensland industry and regional growers in areas such as the Northern Rivers and Coffs Harbour. In New South Wales, many growers produce alternative varieties such as Lady Finger, supplying local markets and contributing to varietal diversity within the Australian banana industry. That diversity strengthens market resilience and provides consumers with choice. In this way, the benefits of the project extend well beyond the immediate control zone and support the long-term sustainability of the industry as a whole.

What do you see as practical outcomes in the long term?

One of the most significant long-term outcomes has been the cultural shift toward greater grower ownership of biosecurity. In earlier programs, inspectors largely carried the responsibility for identifying and destroying infected plants, and many growers relied on them to manage the issue. Over time, that approach has changed. Growers are now far more engaged in the process, they are present during inspections, they understand what Banana Bunchy Top symptoms look like, and in many cases, they are identifying and destroying infected plants themselves before inspectors arrive. That increased awareness and shared responsibility strengthens the overall effectiveness of the containment strategy and builds biosecurity capability within the industry.

Another important outcome has been clearer processes around compliance and enforcement. A long-running case in northern NSW highlighted the limitations of relying solely on project-based inspection when serious non-compliance occurs. The eventual involvement of state biosecurity authorities, and the destruction of the affected property, reinforced the need for a clear separation between extension and enforcement. Project staff play an important role in education, relationship building and guidance, but when compliance issues escalate, regulatory authorities are better placed to intervene. In the long term, having those roles clearly defined supports stronger relationships with growers and ensures that serious biosecurity risks are addressed decisively and transparently.

What were the challenges with adopting the recommendations coming from this research?

One of the challenges has been ensuring that infection data is clearly interpreted and understood by growers.

In some reports, overall trends suggest reductions in Bunchy Top incidence. However, when looking closely at the annual figures in recent years, the pattern has not always been a steady decline. That can create uncertainty about how progress is being measured and what conclusions should be drawn.

There were also periods where inspectors were unable to access certain properties, which meant infection data from those sites was not captured for a time. When significant infection sources are missing from reporting periods, it can influence how trends appear over the short term. For growers, clear explanation of those circumstances is important so they can fully understand what the data is showing and how it relates to on-ground reality.

Biosecurity programs rely heavily on industry confidence. When reporting is detailed and contextualised, growers are more likely to support the recommendations and remain engaged in the process.

Is there a part of the project that could have been improved?

Stephen believes the discontinuation of the PRG was a missed opportunity. In his view, a reference group provides valuable governance and oversight, particularly in long-running biosecurity programs that depend on industry levy investment.

A PRG made up of industry representatives can act as an independent sounding board to review data, discuss reporting approaches, and ensure that both achievements and challenges are communicated transparently. It also provides a structured mechanism for raising concerns early and maintaining strong alignment between project leaders and levy payers.

Reinstating such a group would strengthen accountability and industry confidence, ensuring that the project continues to evolve in a way that reflects both technical outcomes and grower expectations.