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Quarantine: two new inspection centres built

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A BIGGER population, a busier State; more travellers, more goods from more places; faster, more frequent transport—these things have demanded for Western Australia greater efforts to protect its primary industries from the chance introduction of disease and pests which could attack our plants and animals.

The need for protection is clear. Western Australia, previously an isolated area and comparatively disease-free, has suffered in past years, outbreaks of rinderpest and swine fever, of codling moth of apples and sirex wasp in imported timber. These misfortunes involved the slaughter and burning of cattle, the destruction of apples and fumigation costing many thousands of dollars.

Vigilance is always cheaper.

Two new quarantine control centres have grown out of the State's recent rapid expansion—the Department of Agriculture's inspection centres at North Fremantle and at Kewdale Railway Terminal. Both are modern brick buildings designed for their special functions and each serves a number of inspection services.

Quarantine laws

What goes on at each centre is governed by the laws which have been created to protect our agriculture. The Commonwealth Government's aim is to "keep Australia clean" by three forms of quarantine—plant, animal and general. General quarantine deals with human health matters.

In Western Australia plant and animal quarantine are administered by the Department of Agriculture on behalf of the Commonwealth. The Chief of the Department's Horticulture Division, Mr. J. P. Eckersley, is Chief Quarantine Officer (Plants) and the Chief of the Animal Division, Dr. M. R. Gardiner, is Chief Quarantine Officer (Animals).

Each has an inspectorial staff which works closely with Customs Department officers at ports and airports. Members of this staff man both inspection centres and also regularly examine postal goods reaching Perth.

Commonwealth quarantine regulations forbid the entry of many products which are a direct threat from countries where there are many plant diseases not known in Australia. Fruit, plant material and soil are not permitted to enter the country because of undetected virus or other diseases which could bring havoc to our grain, fruit, vegetable or other industries.

Certain plants may be brought into Australia under permit from the quarantine authority in each State, particularly for the introduction of new varieties. These plants are kept in quarantine glasshouses under observation until shown to be free of disease.

Because of the risk of such formidable diseases as foot-and-mouth disease, rinderpest, swine fever and bluetongue (and once in the country, some might never be eradicated), the importation of livestock is banned except for cattle, horses, poultry and boars from New Zealand and horses from the United Kingdom. The entry of cats and dogs into Australia is totally suspended at present.

Animal products may be imported only from countries where specific animal diseases are absent, or from other countries only if they can be certified by responsible authority of the exporting country that they have undergone certain prescribed heat treatments.

Fremantle Inspection Centre

The new inspection centre in Tydeman Road, North Fremantle, is mainly concerned with overseas quarantine. Many items are seized from ships' passengers, fumigated and returned after a few days. The range is wide—from foodstuffs to ornamental caneware, toys, clothing, footwear, and travel mementos from bows and arrows to buffalo horns. Some products, such as raw peanuts, mushrooms or home-prepared sausage, are totally prohibited and cannot be returned.
At the Fremantle Inspection Centre facilities for fumigation include a holding area for incoming material, fumigation rooms and a separate "clean" area of racks for material fumigated and ready to hand back to owners. There are separate systems for animal and plant quarantine.

An external security-fenced area with special drainage sumps is provided for washing vehicles or fumigating large quantities of cargo.

The building caters for two other inspection services administered by the Department. One is the inspection of cereal grains and products—wheat, oats, barley, sorghum and all flour—to see that they meet the Department of Primary Industries export standards; a sample and analysis room is provided for this work.

The inspection of export fruit and vegetables and a small quantity of imported fruit is also administered from the new centre.
Past Work

The establishment of the new inspection centre closes the historic era of the Fremantle Fruit Shed, hard by Arthur’s Head at the shore end of the South Mole. This building, dating from before 1895, was the hub of fruit trading at and before the turn of the century.

The State then grew far less fruit than it needed and imports were considerable. These were the developing years of the Kalgoorlie goldfields, when an influx of people brought the goldfields population above that of the coast. The State was in its first big boom and apples, pears, cherries and other soft fruits were imported from other States, oranges and lemons from Europe and bananas from Fiji. All incoming fruit was closely inspected and all cases were fumigated. Apples, pears and citrus fruit were inspected and fumigated, and soft fruits were visually inspected. All fruit was tipped into sorting trays and repacked into fresh containers. Codling moth and San Jose scale were the main offenders sought and found.

At the same time, importing agents sorted fruit which had not survived the voyage in satisfactory condition. It could be said that all imported fruit marketed in W.A. was “handpicked”.

The shed was indeed a busy place at the height of this importing phase. In 1895, 13,289 cases were received and 86 were condemned as infested. By 1901 the annual tally was 78,174 cases; nearly 10 per cent. (7,079 cases) were destroyed as decayed and unfit for sale, while 1,848 were condemned by inspectors because of infection.

Also in 1901 no less than 116,760 trees and plants passed through the shed, many of them to expand the local fruit-growing industry which eventually reduced the need for imports.
Kewdale Inspection Centre

The Kewdale Inspection Centre, built at a cost of about $150,000, is headquarters for inspection of imported and local produce throughout the Kewdale Terminal complex, and the Perth Airport. It has a huge central floor area for handling and grading produce, as well as fumigation and incineration facilities.

Under State Acts which control the import and movement of produce likely to present disease risk, a wide range of produce is carefully inspected as it reaches Western Australia.

Fruit, vegetables, seeds, animal fodders, wine casks, flowers, nursery plants and young trees are examined.

Where necessary, goods are fumigated or rejected and returned to the sender—or destroyed. The standard maintained keeps codling moth and apple scab from our orchards, serious potato disease out of our potato-growing areas, maintains our vineyards free of phylloxera, prevents the entry of noxious weed seeds and protects our farming activity from many potentially damaging diseases.