


Matthew Cossey

Chief Executive Officer

 @croplife.org.au

 @Matthew_Cossey

Independent Panel
Inquiry to Australia's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

By email: COVID-19Inquiry@pmc.gov.au

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To the Independent Panel

Re: Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

CropLife Australia (CropLife) is the national peak industry organisation representing the plant science (registered agricultural chemicals and plant biotechnology innovations) sector in Australia. CropLife represents the innovators, developers, manufacturers, formulators and suppliers of crop protection products (organic, synthetic and biological based pesticides) and crop biotechnology seed innovations.

CropLife's membership is made up of both large and small, patent holding and generic, Australian and International companies and accordingly, CropLife only advocates for policy positions that deliver whole-of-industry and national benefit. Our focus is, however, specifically on an Australian farming sector that is internationally competitive through globally leading productivity and sustainability and enable the most effective protection of the nation's precious biodiversity and environment. Both of which are achieved through access to world-class technological innovation and products of the plant science sector.

The plant science industry contributes to the nation's agricultural productivity, environmental sustainability and food security through innovation in plant breeding and pesticides that protect crops against pests, weeds and disease. More than \$31 billion of the value of Australia's agricultural production is directly attributable to the responsible use of crop protection products (CPPs), while the plant science industry itself directly employs thousands of people across the country.¹

¹ Deloitte Access Economics, 'Economic Contribution of Crop Protection Products in Australia', August 2023, <https://www.croplife.org.au/resources/reports/economic-contribution-of-crop-protection-products-in-australia/>.



CropLife welcomes the opportunity to provide the Independent Panel with an understanding of how the COVID-19 responses undertaken by both the Australian Government and respective state governments impacted on the operations of the plant science industry.

The agriculture sector is one which is characterised by critical production tasks that need to be completed within specific environmental windows as part of maximising production and optimising operational costs. These tasks include:

- The application of herbicides for weed control, particularly pre-emergent herbicides in preparation to plant crops.
- Planting specific varieties of crops to maximise soil moisture and in-season rainfall and to match flowering times to frost and heat risk.
- The application of insecticides and fungicides in crop to manage insect pest and pathogen populations that will otherwise devastate yield and quality of food crops.

The importance of undertaking these production tasks in a timely manner is highlighted by the fact that the top 20 per cent of Australia's grain farmers indicated that timeliness of operations is a key driver of their grain farming businesses profitability.² The ability of farm businesses to undertake these production tasks in a timely fashion requires functional supply chains that are able to deliver agricultural inputs in a way that fulfils forward orders made by farm businesses and agricultural retailers.

The necessary implementation of public health restrictions as part of the government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic had the potential to disrupt the ability of these supply chains to facilitate farmers having access to these essential inputs. The rapid action from the AGMIN forum to ensure that all sections of the agriculture value chain, including from the front end of our scientific and chemistry testing labs, right through to the ag supply retail distribution network, were declared essential industries in March 2020 assisted to maintain continuity of this supply. As a result, the movement of agriculture related workers across state borders was declared essential and exempted from COVID related state and territory border closures.

Other concerns that arose as a result of government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic included:

- An increase in the time taken to gain access to imported crop protection products or constituents due to an increase in inspection time at port. Early in the pandemic this saw an increase in turnaround time at port from a three-day turnaround to an average of between 10 to 12 days.
- Restrictions on access to high quality personal protective equipment (PRE) and commercial cleaning equipment and supplies placed strain on the ability of the plant science industry to maintain operations.

The decision to appoint a Senior Agriculture Industry Engagement Officer for COVID-19 in the initial days of the COVID-19 pandemic provided an accessible focal point for stakeholder to work with government to minimise the disruptions of necessary public health restrictions on agriculture.

² Paul Blackshaw '[Characteristics and habits of Top 20% farm business operators](#)', GRDC Update Paper, Grains Research and Development Corporation, 16 February 2018.



Should the Panel have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to have the secretariat contact [REDACTED] Director - Government and Strategic Affairs via [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

