

Sustainable fruit fly management in the Murray Valley beyond 2025

The purpose of this document is to record the Murray Valley region's position on fruit fly management beyond the implementation of the current Victorian Fruit Fly Strategy 2021-2025.

Overview

- Queensland fruit fly (Qfly) is now established in Victoria and New South Wales including within the Greater Sunraysia Pest Free Area.
- Victoria's Fruit Fly Strategy 2021-2025 has documented its position on the management of established pests such as Qfly as primarily the responsibility of land managers.
- In the last 10 years, commercial horticultural land managers have significantly increased their knowledge and skills to manage Qfly and are meeting their responsibilities as land managers.
- Through the FFMV program, land managers in the wider community (e.g. residential properties) have been supported to increase their understanding of fruit fly management. This approach seeks to support horticultural industries through better management of off-farm Qfly populations within the region. Adoption of effective fruit fly management within the wider community is varied.
- There is no guarantee of ongoing funding from the state government to support a coordinated community-based program, such as the FFMV, beyond the current commitment to 30 June 2025.
- Growers and industry are meeting their on-farm fruit fly management responsibilities and should not be responsible for funding continued work off-farm and paying for the community at large.
- A funding mechanism coordinated at a state or national level is needed for a coordinated community-based program.
- Without government support, community-based programs to address off-farm fruit fly risk creators will end.

Introduction

Queensland fruit fly is now established in Victoria and New South Wales including within the Greater Sunraysia Pest Free Area (GSPFA). Since the first outbreaks in 2011, commercial horticultural growers have made a significant shift in increasing their knowledge and skills to manage Qfly on their properties. However, fruit fly pressure from off-farm sources (e.g., fruit trees in backyard gardens) continues to provide a risk to high value commercial horticultural production in the region.

Since 2015 the region has been supported by over \$5 million worth of investment from the Victorian Agriculture Ministers, to support the pest free area industry development committee and grants in the Sunraysia region. Along with \$1.9 million from growers (2014-18) to transition from a pest free area to managing an established pest population.

Beyond the current commitment to 30 June 2025, financial support for this regional program from the Victorian state government is likely to cease unless an alternative financial source can be found. The NSW state government has not financially contributed to the area wide management responses for several years.

The Victoria state government has detailed their position on the management of established pests such as Qfly, in that it is primarily the responsibility of land managers (Agriculture Victoria, 2021). All land managers need to meet their responsibilities to ensure Murray Valley horticulture industries can effectively manage Queensland fruit fly on-farm.



On-farm management of Qfly

Commercial horticultural growers within the region have proactively increased their understanding, knowledge, and skills in managing Qfly on their properties. They are now well-educated in knowing how to manage Qfly, continually monitoring their own farms and protecting their fruit. They have adapted their programs to meet trade requirements and produce fruit in the current environment. However, the cost of managing Qfly (increased control and crop loss) remains strongly influenced by pressure from off-farm populations.

Growers contributed to addressing off-site risk creators for four years, establishing the GSPFA Industry Development Committee in December 2014, until December 2018. Growers add value to the region through horticultural production and jobs. They are doing their part and should not be responsible for Qfly management in the wider community.

Horticulture is one of the main industries supporting the Murray Valley region, especially many of the smaller townships. Commercial horticultural growers contributed significantly to not only to the economy of the region but to the economy of the state and country. The region is renowned for high-value horticultural crops, including citrus, table grapes, stone fruit, wine grapes, dried fruit, nuts, vegetables, and olives. The estimated value of Qfly-impacted crops within the region is over \$950 million annually.

Off-farm management of Qfly

Residential communities and some farming communities with lower susceptibility to Qfly pressures may contribute to the pest risk in the region. High pressure seasons such as those experienced between 2020-23 associated with the La Niña weather events have demonstrated the continued need for off-site risk reduction.

Regulatory mechanisms aren't functioning adequately to ensure that commercial properties not managing Qfly are meeting their responsibilities. The current regulatory mechanisms require neighbours to report infestations, only after it is having a detrimental impact on their produce. This is too late. There are no provisions under the current regulations to address highly visible non-compliance and repeat offenders, without an infested lands notification. Community engagement is most effective if it is reinforced compliance for blatant and large-scale non-compliance (White et al 2021).

It is difficult to quantify the contribution of off-farm risk, due to seasonal variations in Qfly populations and the varied application of Qfly management activities across the region. Managing off-farm Qfly risk also involves a wide variety of stakeholders and differing circumstances – it is therefore inherently difficult to coordinate or fund. It is outside grower's capacity to coordinate off-farm risks and there is insufficient evidence that there would be a return on investment for commercial horticulture growers/industry to reduce pressure off-farm.



Vision for fruit fly management in the region beyond 2025

The FFMV Regional Advisory group (hereafter referred to as 'the group') has identified what they believe is their ideal vision for the region beyond June 2025 in that:

Murray Valley horticulture industries can effectively manage Qfly, supported by data that identifies areas of high off-farm pest pressure and delivery of targeted activities within the region. Support activities could include:

a) Identifying sources of off-farm high or very high pest pressure, though collection, interrogation and provision of knowledge and evidence of fruit fly pressure.

b) Reducing high pest pressure by targeting specific off-farm areas through a combination of education and on-ground actions, backed up by a regulatory approach.

c) Maintaining and promoting education materials that explain the impacts of fruit fly and ways the Murray Valley community can support suppression of fruit fly populations.

The group considers that to achieve this vision there needs to be a coordinated approach across growers, industry, and government. Growers supported by industry are providing considerable contribution to the management of Qfly within the region through implementing on-farm controls.

Management of off-farm risk is outside the remit of growers and industry. Behavioural change within the community needs to be driven at a strategic level by the government to enable a coordinated and targeted approach to off-farm risk management. Achieving behavioural change across a community as wide and diverse as the Murray Valley can take a considerable amount of time and effort. Past programs have achieved significant change within the region, with the removal of unwanted fruit trees and training programs for people willing to put the time and effort into producing clean fruit.

The Intergovernmental Agreement on Biosecurity (IGAB) identifies that it is the responsibility of the states and territories to support landholders and the community to manage established pests and diseases. The Victorian state government has met this responsibility over the last eight years, investing in both a coordinated area wide management program and in fruit fly research. There is no guarantee of continued ongoing support from the state government to support a coordinated community-based program, beyond the current commitment to 30 June 2025. Investment in research is valuable, however it is critical to ensure that investment also focuses on implementing on-ground change.

Local government consider that it is the responsibilities of the states to support landholders and the community to manage established pests and diseases and would not support any shift of these responsibilities to local government. The only practical way for area wide management to continue to occur is through a state or national coordinated funding mechanism.

The group does recognise that even at the state or national level there is a lack of options for coordination or funding of fruit fly management. There is no clear model to adopt and, it is hoped that the National Fruit Fly Resourcing Options paper will provide guidance for this. They also note that no clear direction or leadership for fruit fly management has emerged from large programs such as Sterile Insect Technology, and that this technology still requires not only a significant long-term financial investment but also considerable time to implement.



Conclusion

It remains the strong position from the members of the group that risk creators need to take responsibility for the off-farm management of Qfly. Growers and industry should not be responsible for funding continued work off-farm and paying for the community at large. Funding mechanisms for a coordinated program to support Murray Valley horticulture industries to effectively manage Qfly, need to be facilitated at state or national level.

Without government support, any coordinated approach across growers, industry, and government to manage Qfly within the region will end. Regional Qfly numbers are likely to fluctuate in response to environmental conditions. Growers in susceptible industries will continue to implement control and monitoring programs on-farm. With no area-wide management, each grower will focus on protecting their susceptible commodities from infestation.

In years of high pest pressure (e.g., 2020-23 with ideal climate conditions for Qfly numbers to explode), it is likely that crop loss will occur and the cost to manage will be significant. There isn't a quantitative measure of area wide management impact, and the region hasn't experienced high pest pressure without an off-farm area wide management program. This may be prohibitive to production and threatens the economy of the region.

The group does not support the concept of industry funding off-farm fruit fly management programs. Off-farm fruit fly management requires government coordination and involve contribution from risk-creators.

References

Australian Horticulture Statistics Handbook (2019/20), HortInnovation

Agriculture Victoria (2021) Victoria's Fruit Fly Strategy 2021-2025, Agriculture Victoria, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, State of Victoria

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