



**Australian Council of Prawn Fisheries Ltd (ACPF)  
Submission:**

***'Review of the biosecurity risks of prawns imported from all countries  
for human consumption' Draft Report***

*for the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment*

December 2020

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## INTRODUCTION

The Australian Council of Prawn Fisheries (ACPF) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the 'Review of the biosecurity risks of prawns imported from all countries for human consumption' Draft Report.

The ACPF is the National peak industry body that represents Australia's wild catch prawn industry. The Council is comprised of regional, State, and Commonwealth wild-prawn fishing and marketing associations, and individual fishing companies around Australia. The Council represents and makes this submission on behalf of our members:

- Clarence River Fisherman's Co-op Ltd
- Gulf St Vincent Prawn Fishery
- Moreton Bay Seafood Industry Association Inc
- North Queensland Trawler Supplies
- Northern Prawn Fishery Industry Pty Ltd
- Professional Fisherman's Association Inc
- Queensland Seafood Industry Association
- Seafood Industry Victoria
- Shark Bay Prawn Trawler Operators Association Inc
- Spencer Gulf and West Coast Prawn Fishermen's Association Inc
- Queensland Seafood Marketers Association Inc
- Austral Fisheries Pty Ltd
- MG Kailis Pty Ltd – Exmouth Gulf Prawn
- Murphy Operator P/L
- A. Raptis & Sons Pty Ltd

The ACPF notes that the scope of the 'Review of the biosecurity risks of prawns imported from all countries for human consumption' includes consideration of the biosecurity risks associated with the import of prawns from all countries for human consumption *and* identification of biosecurity measures to manage those risks to a very low level in order to achieve Australia's appropriate level of protection (ALOP).

It is understood that, on review of findings from recreational fishing practices survey and of the responses to this review, the Department will issue additional changes to the current importation protocols as required.

## SUMMARY

The ACPF acknowledges the completion of the review of the biosecurity risks of prawns imported from all countries for human consumption and identification of hazards via potential pathways.

In its submission to the “Review of the circumstances leading to the 2017 suspension of uncooked prawn imports into Australia and the biosecurity considerations relevant to future trade in uncooked prawns’ for the Commonwealth Inspector-General of Biosecurity in April 2017 (ACPF, 2017), the ACPF concluded that the controls implemented in response to the 2009 IRA were not appropriate for the documented high risk in that they:

1. were functionally insufficient to control the biosecurity risk
2. were prone to human failure/abuse and not properly implemented at each step equating to a significant biosecurity breach exceeding the Acceptable Level of Protection (ALOP)
3. did not contain prescribed post-border controls as are practiced for other commodities, and
4. allowed high risk uncooked prawns entry into a disease-free environment via more than one pathway for an unknown period of time
5. did not provide for a transparent process of review and amendment to take account of new emerging risks.

In assessing the Draft Report, the ACPF has referenced its 2017 recommendations being that the review should address (i) altered risks in currently identified pathways *and* (ii) the implementation of the bio-security framework, and (iii) importation protocols.

The following assessments are supported:

- i. The broadening of diseases to include pathogens in addition to YHV and WSSV
- ii. Focus on the major pathways such as bait use and as crustacean feed as the risk posed in the minor pathways appears to be decreasing and is likely minimal
- iii. Pre-border visual inspection is an insufficient control measure on its own
- iv. Re-categorisation of marinated prawns into the uncooked category as they were identified as having high disease prevalence in 2016 and could be repurposed for use as bait
- v. Par-cooking breaded, battered or crumbed (BBC) products to ensure adherence of coating, reducing the risk of entry into high risk pathways
- vi. The retention of trade of product with disease free countries, including Australian product that has been processed in certified processing plants

The following recommendations are made:

### **Altered risks in disease introduction pathways**

- a. That the review report clearly outlines the process for assessing new and emerging risks outside of a formal and properly resourced IRA review process
- b. That the review report explicitly acknowledge that the bait pathway risk cannot be properly assessed – neither should import protocols be varied from the current interim provisions or to those proposed – until this risk is properly understood with the completion and release of the results of the recreational fishing survey

### **Implementation of the bio-security framework to reduce risk**

- c. That resourcing required to assess imports on entry to meet the ALOP should largely be cost-recovered as was advised by IGB, 2017
- d. That additional or alternative means of inactivating pathogens in uncooked prawns be considered (as occurs for imported pork products) if Australia wishes to continue retailing uncooked imported prawns for human consumption, noting that the review report acknowledges that head, shell and vein removal is not sufficient to remove all pathogens eg WSSV
- e. That the review report clearly outlines the testing regime for each of the prawn categories, the justification for it and trigger mechanisms for increased surveillance for each of those categories
- f. That the review report details the post-border measures that are proposed as per the IGB, 2017 recommendations

### **Importation protocols**

- g. That additional pre-border processing requirements be added for uncooked prawns from countries with known disease to ensure that ALOP is met in light of previous demonstrated failure in pre-border, entry and post-border measures
- h. That testing regimes be made clear in the proposed protocols including the regime for products categorised as low risk
- i. That altering legibility of labelling be rejected as a satisfactory post-border risk mitigation for managing risks posed by uncooked prawns processed as per the proposed protocols
- j. That the review propose more effective post-border measures than product labelling and education campaigns

## BACKGROUND

The ACPF notes that the review of Australia's importation protocols for prawns imported from all countries for human consumption commenced in May 2017 following confirmation of White Spot Disease (WSD) and subsequent destocking in prawn farms on the Logan River in south-east Queensland between December 2016 and February 2017. A number of White Spot Syndrome Virus (WSSV) infected prawns and crabs were also subsequently detected nearby in the wild near the Logan River and in Deception Bay.

While there were numerous potential sources of infection, the Inspector-General of Biosecurity, 2017 (IGB, 2017) "found no evidence that any (disease introduction pathway) were higher risk than the bait pathway" ie the use of WSSV-infected imported prawns used as bait in the feeder canals adjacent to prawn farms. The Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (the department) has "focused on addressing evident biosecurity problems in the imported uncooked retail prawn pathway".

The ACPF notes that importation at the time of the outbreak was under the protocols developed as per the 2009 Import Risk Assessment (IRA) for importation of green prawns. The protocols were intended to minimise the risk of disease incursions - in particular WSSV and Yellow Head Virus (YHV) - from imported prawns to Australia.

In the "Review of the circumstances leading to the 2017 suspension of uncooked prawn imports into Australia and the biosecurity considerations relevant to future trade in uncooked prawns" for the Commonwealth Inspector-General of Biosecurity in April 2017, the ACPF concluded that the controls implemented in response to the IRA were not appropriate for the documented high risk in that they:

1. were functionally insufficient to control the biosecurity risk
2. were prone to human failure/abuse and not properly implemented at each step equating to a significant biosecurity breach exceeding the Acceptable Level of Protection (ALOP)
3. did not contain prescribed post-border controls as are practiced for other commodities, and
4. allowed high risk uncooked prawns entry into a disease-free environment via more than one pathway for an unknown period of time
5. did not provide for a transparent process of review and amendment to take account of new emerging risks.

The ACPF recommended that the review process include (1) altered risks in currently identified pathways, (2) the implementation of the bio-security framework, and (3) importation protocols. Consideration should cover but not be limited to:

- Prawn and crustacean diseases that have emerged since 2009 and methods to proactively include emerging diseases in importation protocols rather than responding retrospectively

- The increase in both the production of farmed prawns from countries with WSSV and international trade of farmed prawns from countries with WSSV increasing Australia's disease exposure
- Changing consumer behaviours when purchasing and using green imported prawns (eg for bait) increasing the risk of disease along pathways previously underrated
- The definition of a 'highly processed prawn' given the evidence that such processing does not deactivate disease, provides a loophole to avoid border testing, and does not prevent product diversion from this pathway to the aquatic environment
- Pre-border surveillance measures to ensure the sanitary status of the exporting country given the importance of country of origin in biosecurity measures
- Proficiency test of laboratories used to assess the status of import products to ensure a consistent approach is being undertaken to reduce risks
- Post-border biosecurity control measures to strengthen disincentives for product substitution and mislabelling that place greater onus on importing entities to adhere to biosecurity regulations
- Recognition that, based on 100% negative tests results for WSSV and YHV in NATA-approved laboratories, Australian prawns processed overseas and reimported for sale on the Australian domestic market are a **low-risk** disease pathway, but must be subject to the same level of biosecurity scrutiny as other prawn imports to ensure there are no product substitution or cross-contamination risks
- Options to improve on-farm bio-security to mitigate disease risks to wild-catch crustacean populations (Refer Stephens 2017)
- The need for an agreed, transparent process and timeline for amending the biosecurity protocols and/or the IRA if and when risk ratings change and/or new risks emerge.

The ACPF has supported the Department's alteration of 2009 protocols (Figure 1) to the current protocols (Figure 1) as risks were identified throughout the review period to:

1. reallocate marinated prawns into the uncooked category (30/6/2017) to reduce the risk of previously untested marinated prawns being repurposed as bait
2. require par-cooking of breaded, battered or crumbed (BBC) prawns (30/9/2017) to ensure that the coating adheres to the prawn surface and reduce the risk of BBC prawns being repurposed as bait
3. require uncooked prawns to be deveined in addition to having head and shell removed in order to reduce infection risk for identified diseases (14/5/2020)

2010 import protocols based on 2009 review

Sourced from countries free of high risk diseases (chilled)  
+  
General health certification issued in the exporting country  
+  
Packaging marked 'for human consumption only' and 'not to be used as bait or feed for aquatic animals'

OR

Cooked in Competent Authority approved premises  
+  
Health certification issued in the exporting country

OR

Highly processed (head and shell off; breaded, marinated, etc)  
+  
General health certification issued in the exporting country  
+  
Packaging marked 'for human consumption only' and 'not to be used as bait or feed for aquatic animals'

OR

Head and shell off unmarinated (frozen)  
+  
General health certification issued in the exporting country  
+  
Batch tested on arrival for WSSV & YHV  
+  
Packaging marked 'for human consumption only' and 'not to be used as bait or feed for aquatic animals'

2020 import protocols as altered throughout the review

Sourced from countries free of high risk diseases (chilled)  
+  
General health certification issued in the exporting country  
+  
Packaging marked 'for human consumption only' and 'not to be used as bait or feed for aquatic animals'

OR

Cooked in Competent Authority approved premises  
+  
Health certification issued in the exporting country

OR

Highly processed head and shell off; ~~marinated~~, ~~par-cooked~~  
breaded/battered/ crumbed)  
+  
General health certification issued in the exporting country  
+  
Packaging marked 'for human consumption only' and 'not to be used as bait or feed for aquatic animals'

OR

Head and shell off, ~~deveined~~ unmarinated or ~~marinated~~ (frozen)  
+  
General health certification issued in the exporting country  
+  
Batch tested on arrival for WSSV & YHV  
+  
Packaging marked 'for human consumption only' and 'not to be used as bait or feed for aquatic animals'

Figure 1: 2010 import protocols vs 2020 protocols



## RESPONSE TO DRAFT REVIEW REPORT

The ACPF notes that the aim of Australia's ALOP for prawn importation to reduce the overall risk of disease introduction of identified diseases to 'very low' or lower via a combination of measures has not altered since 2009. It is acknowledged that, while Australia appears to have a zero-risk tolerance for the importation of other raw proteins such as red meat and chicken, prawn importation is well established and importation protocols must adhere to WTO principles.

In reviewing the 2016 WSD outbreak the ACPF recommended that this review to at least include:

- 1) **Altered risks in disease introduction pathways**: review of new and emerging diseases, increase in trade from WSSV infected countries, increase in repurposing imported prawns as bait and a process for continual monitoring and review of new and emerging risks.
- 2) **Implementation of the bio-security framework to reduce risk**: categorisation of high-risk products as low risk and measures at each of pre-border, entry and post-border.
- 3) **Importation protocols**: that adequately address assessed risks and the likelihood of implementation of the biosecurity framework to reduce risk.

### 1) **Altered risks in disease introduction pathways**

**Hazard identification 2018-2020**: The review of pathogen hazards, their OIE listed status and consequences if introduced into Australian waters is to be commended. Australia has shown its ability to zone and/or compartmentalize areas to at least control disease spread and maintain disease free status outside of the compartmentalized areas. The broadening of hazard pathogens from WSSV and Yellow Head Virus (YHV) in 2009 to the current identified list demonstrates the rate of hazard change that can occur within crustacean diseases and Australia's relatively disease-free status.

**Hazard identification 2020 and beyond**. The IGB, 2017 stated that it took 12 years to complete the 2009 review and full reviews are very resource expensive. It is still not clear what the department's process and resourcing will be to identify and address risks from new and emerging diseases beyond the 2018-2020 review (and associated importation protocols).

**Volume exposure 2018-2020**: It is uncertain whether the likelihoods of entry, exposure and establishment are ranked considering the exposure impact of any volume changes of high risk, uncooked prawns. Importation of high risk, uncooked prawns has dropped from the estimated half (15 tonnes) of the nearly 30 tonnes of imported prawns in 2005 to one third (8.4 tonnes) of 25 tonnes imported in 2019. This demonstrates a change in

market dynamics, which may have been in response to the 2010 importation protocols, but also flags the need for the department to continue monitoring other imported prawn categories for mislabelling as the volume risk grows in those categories (as reported by the IGB, 2017).

Introduction pathway: The ACPF supports the review's focus on the major pathways such as bait use and crustacean feed as the risk posed in the minor pathways appears to be decreasing and is likely minimal (eg it is illegal for commercial processors to dump prawn waste).

Bait use 2018-20: The ACPF will provide further comment on release of the recreational fish survey data, however the review findings support that imported prawns repurposed for use as bait are increasingly purchased from supermarkets (as opposed to buying bait from specialist bait shops). The risk of using imported prawns as bait may be unknown to and/ or ignored by some recreational fishers. The risk exposure in this pathway is increasing and is difficult to control and the ACPF commends the department for its conclusion that the practice has not been controlled with warning signs or education campaigns. However, the ACPF questions how the review could conclude that warning labelling in a combination of other measures and recommendations on altered font size is sufficient to address this risk pathway.

This pathway has significantly altered since the early 2000s, needs to be ranked accordingly and reflected in importation protocols.

**Recommendation:**

- a) **That the review report clearly outline the process for assessing new and emerging risks outside of a formal and properly resourced IRA review process**
- b) **The review report acknowledge that the bait pathway risk cannot be properly assessed – neither should import protocols be varied from the current interim provisions or to those proposed – until this risk is properly understood with the completion and release of the recreational fishing survey**

**2) Implementation of the bio-security framework to reduce risk**

Pre-entry processing: It is noted that the level of processing required to minimize the infection risk for a range of pathogens in uncooked prawns varies ie what may be sufficient to reduce risk for DIV1 is insufficient for WSSV.

The ACPF supports the move of marinated prawns to the uncooked category due to the fact that marination, unlike cooking, does not reduce disease risk, may or may not reduce the likelihood for use as bait, and previous shipments of marinated prawns tested WSSV positive (IGB, 2017).

The ACPF acknowledges the 2020 requirement to devein uncooked prawns but notes that it only satisfactorily reduces disease risk for some pathogens and cannot be seen as an adequate measure in addition to removing the head and shell.

The IGB, 2017 suggested irradiation of uncooked prawns as a reasonable means of risk minimization. Whether or not this method can be further investigated is unrelated to the point made that methods, eg similar to that utilized for pork, should be considered to reduce disease risk in high risk prawns. If Australia wishes to continue to import uncooked prawns for retail purchase they must meet the ALOP via measures that are not prone to failure.

Pre-entry assessment: It is noted that a competent authority need only provide a visual assessment of prawns following visual inspection on the processing line. Exportation of disease-free prawns (20 passes) is rewarded with reduced testing. It is a proven risk that, if entry checks fail, as occurred in 2016, pre-entry assessment rigour also lapses. The exporting competent authority certificate is only a reasonable risk mitigation strategy if adequate border testing is applied. The ACPF supports the review's conclusion that pre-entry visual assessment is insufficient for disease prevention.

Entry assessment: The required rate of sampling for 'surveillance' items (uncooked prawns) versus 'risk' items (cooked prawns) may be effective to reduce disease introduction to 'very low' however its effectiveness hinges on its execution as was demonstrated in 2016. While the sampling and testing regime for prawns under surveillance from 2017 may achieve 95% confidence at a 5% prevalence, the review does not appear to have considered the real possibility of inspection confusion, system rorting and testing failure as was uncovered in Operation Cattai. The review report does not provide clear advice on how failures in the testing regime will be addressed.

The resourcing required to assess imports on entry to meet the ALOP should largely be cost-recovered as was advised by IGB, 2017. Lack of resourcing, as occurred prior to 2016/2017, is an insufficient reason not to meet an ALOP.

The review report does not provide further assurance that re-categorisation of prawns as cooked or par-cooked BBC prawns won't result in release of disease pathogen. FSANZ advice to no longer test cooked prawn consignments (for pathogens unrelated to public health) is an invitation for importers to rort Australia's biosecurity system. Adequate levels of 'seals intact' inspections will be vital. Entry inspection and testing is a vital defense but cannot be the only defense (IGB, 2017) where imported products are high risk. Education campaigns or labelling at retail should not be relied on as a 'hopeful last line of defense'.

Post-entry measures: The only post entry measures mentioned are labelling and notification for uncooked prawns sold at retail with the aim of preventing them from probable entry into the bait pathway. The IGB, 2017 recommended that *"the department and state/territory governments and industry should agree on (and cost share, as relevant) measures for monitoring and minimising risks of any imported uncooked prawn product entering waterways. Measures could include:*

- *periodic surveillance of retail prawns for target diseases*
- *periodic assessment of fishing practices*
- *targeted public awareness programs discouraging use of imported prawns as bait*
- *prevention of recreational fishing and surveillance of wild crustaceans close to prawn farms, and*
- *surveillance of bait shops to ensure they are not selling prawns imported for human consumption.”*

This review and proposed importation protocols does not suggest any such post-border approach and continues to rely on pre-border, at-border mechanisms and product labelling, all of which have previously failed.

**Recommendation:**

- c) The resourcing required to assess imports on entry to meet the ALOP should largely be cost-recovered as was advised by IGB, 2017**
- d) That additional or alternative means of inactivating pathogens in uncooked prawns be considered (as occurs for imported pork products) if Australia wishes to continue retailing uncooked imported prawns for human consumption, noting that the review report acknowledges that head, shell and vein removal is not sufficient to remove all pathogens eg WSSV**
- e) That the review report clearly outline the testing regime for each of the prawn categories, the justification for the categories, and trigger mechanisms for increased surveillance for each of those categories**
- f) That the review report detail the post-border measures that are proposed as per the IGB, 2017 recommendations**

### **3) Importation protocols**

It is noted that a risk assessment has been completed for each of the identified hazard pathogens, including a summary. It would be assumed that the most conservative importation protocols have been proposed in order to achieve very low (or lower) ALOP across all assessed diseases however there appears misalignment between the assessed likelihood of measures to protect against disease and the protocols. For example, WSSV continues to pose High risk if uncooked prawns have head, shell and vein removed. The reliance on two lots of testing - pre-export and on arrival testing - to reduce the risk to Very Low is entirely reliant on adequate resourcing and execution of the sampling regime, neither of which occurred prior to 2016/17.

The proposed importation protocols are interpreted as a diagram (Figure 2) with proposed additions from current protocol identified. The risks and potential hazards that the ACPF believe are insufficiently addressed are highlighted in the comments alongside Figure 2.

**Sourced from countries free of high-risk diseases (chilled frozen unless chilled for Candidatus)**  
 +  
**General health certification issued in the exporting country**  
 +  
**Packaging marked 'for human consumption only' and 'not to be used as bait or feed for aquatic animals'**

**OR**

**Cooked in Competent Authority approved premises**  
 +  
**Health certification issued in the exporting country**

**OR**

**Highly processed head and shell off; par-cooked breaded/battered/ crumbed)**  
 +  
**General health certification issued in the exporting country**  
 +  
**Packaging marked 'for human consumption only' and 'not to be used as bait or feed for aquatic animals'**

**OR**

**Head and shell off, deveined uncooked unmarinated or marinated (frozen)**  
 +  
**General health certification issued in the exporting country**  
 +  
**Batch tested on arrival for WSSV & YHV**  
 +  
**Packaging marked 'for human consumption only' and 'not to be used as bait or feed for aquatic animals'**

**Figure 2: Proposed importation protocols and comment**

The retention of trade of product with disease free countries, including Australian product that has been processed in certified processing plants is noted.  
 Recommend surveillance of random consignments

Border inspection is recommended, such as the department's 2017 request for 25% of randomly selected consignments to undergo full seals-intact inspections, as adherence to the requirements is vital for disease control and not demonstrated in Operation Cattai.

Par-cooking is a welcome addition to the BBC category to reduce likelihood of repurposing for bait  
 Border inspection is recommended, such as the department's 2017 request for 25% of randomly selected consignments to undergo full seals-intact inspections, as adherence to the requirements is vital for disease control and not demonstrated in Operation Cattai.

Proposed pre-entry processing known to insufficiently reduce WSSV risk. Suggest further investigation of irradiation as a middle ground to cooking  
 General health certification is a visual assessment and insufficient to detect existing or new diseases  
 Batch testing may not be implemented as required, as occurred in the 2016-17 outbreak  
 Education and labelling have been proven not to be an adequate post-border control measure and are a poor last line of defence

The proposed biosecurity controls are reliant on importers doing the right thing and border inspection and testing regimes proficient in detecting hazards in products that are ranked high risk. Neither of these measures have been shown to be fail proof. It is also unclear in the proposed protocols what warrants the department's proposed additional intervention and if those measures will take place.

The IGB, 2017 discussed the possibility of screening supply of uncooked prawns for retail sale and food service differently. The ACPF supports the conclusion that this would be too difficult to administer. The only intermediate may be to only allow pre-packed uncooked prawns with very clear image-based labelling for retail sale (word-based instructions are insufficient), including from deli cabinets. However this is unlikely to be accepted by retailers and so the review must propose more reliable pre-border measures.

This review must consider the importation protocols of other proteins, eg pork, and consider measures such as irradiation or further treatment of uncooked products if the Australian supply chain wishes to continue the retail of uncooked prawn products imported from countries with known disease infection.

Measures such as education campaigns and requirements that the "not for use as bait" labelling be made more obvious without any proposed retail surveillance is an attempt to pass biosecurity responsibility to the public – who continue to not understand and/or ignore labelling warnings.

The ACPF notes that the extent to which the proposed biosecurity protocols are inappropriate to achieve ALOP for uncooked prawns will not be confirmed until the recreational fishing survey results are released. The ACPF reserves the opportunity to be able to make further comment at that time.

**Recommendation:**

- g) That additional pre-border processing requirements be added for uncooked prawns from countries with known disease to ensure that ALOP is met in light of previous demonstrated failure of each of pre-border, entry and post-border measures**
- h) That testing regimes - including the regime for products categorised as low risk - be made clear in the proposed protocols**
- i) That altering 'legibility of labelling' be rejected as a satisfactory post-border risk mitigation for managing risks posed by uncooked prawns processed**
- j) That the review propose more effective post-border measures more effective than product labelling and education campaigns**

## REFERENCES

Inspector-General of Biosecurity 2017, (IGB, 2017) Uncooked prawn imports: effectiveness of biosecurity controls, Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, Canberra

Stephens (2017), "A Plan for the Prawn Farming Industry's Initial Response to the White Spot Disease Incident in Summer 2016-17. FRDC project 2016-266 Canberra 2017