

Blueberry Rust Status Update

Season 2021/2022

Industry Briefing Paper

Current at 1 April 2022

Background

Blueberry rust (BBR) detections have been increasing with ten new infected premises (IPs) since February 2022, and a total of eleven new IPs since the commencement of the 2021/22 season. Most significantly, the rust has spread further west than before and has also spread to the south for the first time. This suggests conditions have changed and the existing containment course-of-action requires consideration for review of suitability and appropriateness.

Current Situation

There are currently seventeen IPs, with three now resolved (2IP, 3IP and 5IP) – the most recent detection being designated 20IP. The following table indicates how the number of detections has increased this season:

Season	No. of IPs detected	Region
2016/17	3	NW
2017/18	2	NW
2018/19	2	NW
2019/20	0	
2020/21	2	N & NW
2021/22	11	S, N & NW
Total	20	

In addition to the eleven new detections made this season, an IP which had managed BBR through treatments and not seen it on-site for some years has had it return this season. Although not conclusive, this suggests a new infection rather than a re-emergence of an old infection which effectively increases the number of new infections this season to twelve. Further re-infections at IPs would be reliant on owners self-reporting to BT.

Annual Surveillance Progress

Routine annual surveys for BBR, conducted by BT primarily to support market access arrangements, have been completed in the north-west and south. It is anticipated (assuming no disruption to the current survey booking schedule) that surveys on the remaining northern properties will be completed by 8 April. This means that there is a possibility of the number of IPs increasing further. At this stage there are 17 out of 67 (approx.) or 25% of known blueberry production sites deemed infected.

Resolved Premises

There are currently three resolved premises (designated RP) - 2RP, 3RP and 5RP. Evidence suggests that BBR did not return to 2RP and 5RP due to a break in the rust cycle from a substantial dormant period where growers reported 100% leaf drop. Only organic-approved treatments were used which were stopped prior to the season where final surveillance took place to clear the sites. Note also that 3RP were not growers and elected to destroy their plants rather than manage the rust (no longer exists).

Tracing

Some IPs appear to have been infected by wind (due to proximity to an IP) whilst others have suspected infection from Pick Your Own (PYO) members of public due to their relative geographic isolation. New plants have been suspected as a source of infection at three IPs, though this cannot be proven. In short, there is no conclusive evidence, and the source of infection cannot be determined for the majority of IPs – which is not unusual for rust diseases.

Containment

BT has been managing BBR under a Containment Plan which regulates IPs under the *Plant Quarantine Act 1997* via legal directions/permits and Site Management Plans. This effectively regulates the movement of material from infected sites, manages the disease through treatments, and applies strict hygiene procedures – to best ensure that BBR is contained to the site. The first containment plan ran for three years from 2017/18 to 2019/20 and a review at the end of that period was optimistic with no new detections in the final year. A second containment plan (2020/21 to 2022/23) began with just four IPs being managed.

Containment Triggers

The following triggers were written as points where the containment plan should be reviewed.

1. BBR detections outside the north-west zone of four IPs and three resolved premises
2. BBR detected in another host other than blueberry
3. BBR detected in home gardens
4. BBR detected in a commercial orchard in the south
5. Regulating states (WA and SA) no longer accept fruit under the Pest Free Places of Production (PFPP) trade protocol

Currently triggers 1 and 4 have been met, whilst trigger 5 is under review (WA and SA are considering the current situation – refer Market Access below). Regarding trigger 3, BT receive between five and ten enquires each season from members of the public asking if they have BBR on their garden plants. No positive detections have resulted to date meaning this trigger has not been met. Similarly trigger 2 regarding other host plants has not been met and this situation stands for the whole of Australia.

Situation in Other States

WA and SA continue to regulate for BBR as these states remain free of the disease. Victoria changed its BBR status in mid-2021 after detection at three sites whereby they considered it not feasible to eradicate. The disease is present in NSW and Queensland.

Market Access

BT are obliged to inform WA and SA of any new detections. Whilst these states are currently considering their positions, trade has continued this season (via both the Trade Agreement and the Pest Free Place of Production [PFPP] protocol). It is unlikely that the market access situation will change before the end of this season (which is imminent), however BT believe that changes are likely for next season. WA have recently provided advice to BT that they are unlikely to approve the PFPP protocol for next season.

Research and Development

One advantage of containing BBR was to create a holding pattern whilst research could be undertaken to assist with managing the disease. Areas such as effective chemicals for organic producers, survival of rust spores in the Tasmanian climate, and defoliation trials to determine the impact on plant health are potential factors in minimising the impacts of BBR.

Future Management

Given the changes described above, BT are considering future management options.