Call yourself a professional? Developing and demonstrating skills and competency in Plant Biosecurity

INTRODUCTION

The first finding of ash dieback in the natural environment in the UK in 2012 resulted in a major review of plant biosecurity. This led to the publication (Defra, April 2014) of ‘Protecting Plant Health—a plant biosecurity strategy for Great Britain’ describing plans to further strengthen plant biosecurity and steps to achieve the 2020 vision.

One of the two ‘Underpinning Requirements’ was to address issues in government, its agencies, industry, NGOs, landowners and the public concerning capability and capacity both in protecting the critical mass of core capability, whilst also creating opportunities for a wider community of plant health professionals. In response to this, Defra and the Government Office of Science commissioned the authors to carry out a review and suggest recommendations to achieve this aim (summarised in Figure 1).

DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW PLANT HEALTH PROFESSIONALS REGISTER

A key element of this work was the development of the Plant Health Professionals Register managed by the Royal Society of Biology.

The basis of the Register was development of a new National Plant Biosecurity Curriculum and competency framework based on the skills requirements articulated in the GB Plant Health Strategy (2014). The competency framework is based on four clusters concerning regulations, responsibilities, risk based decision-making and management (Figure 3).

Applications may apply at one of three grades—Associate, Registered or Senior level with increasing levels of competency required at each.

Progression through the grades is encouraged as part of continual professional development (CPD) allowing candidates to build their skills in plant health and biosecurity.

A key element of the Royal Society of Biology scheme is the mandatory requirement to demonstrate CPD across a range of skills throughout the year. Applications may be submitted during the year and are reviewed on a quarterly basis by both a primary and secondary assessor appointed by the RSB.

OUTCOMES

The first cohort of applicants was registered at Associate, Registered or Senior level in the spring of 2015 with an incremental increase in numbers since then. By the end of 2018 it is expected there will be up to 300 Plant health professionals from government and its agencies registered in the UK. The Plant Health Professionals Register was selected as one of the three finalists in the 2016 Civil Service Awards in the Skills category that recognises ‘a collective leadership group that has displayed excellence in promoting skills’ (see Figure 4).

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