Prawns: White Spot Virus

QUESTION

Wednesday, 28 March 2001

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Prawns: White Spot Virus

Senator WOODLEY (Queensland) (2.40 pm)—My question is addressed to the Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Senator Hill, Minister, is the government aware of reports that the white spot virus has been discovered in the Gippsland Lakes in south-east Victoria? Is this incursion the result of infected prawns imported from Vietnam for human consumption being used as bait in recreational fishing? Has the company responsible for the Vietnamese imports also distributed infected prawns through retail outlets in New South Wales and to the Manly Aquarium World in Sydney? Why are the protocols worked out in close consultation with the Thai government and others not working?

Senator HILL (South Australia—Minister for the Environment and Heritage)—I was unaware of this claimed outbreak in the Gippsland Lakes, and I am seeking information on that issue. In relation to the importation of green prawns, as the honourable senator would know, green prawns have been imported for decades. They constitute about five per cent of all prawn imports. I understand that the use of uncooked prawns as bait was identified as a quarantine risk in 1996 and was banned at that time. After that, an import risk analysis was commenced. That draft IRA report was released in August last year and recommended tighter controls. I understand that those controls were announced as interim measures on 15 December 2000 and that new measures even further tightening the controls were announced on 5 February this year. I can provide details of those restraints to Senator Woodley, if he wishes.

These interim measures are to remain in force until the risk assessment analysis of prawns and prawn products is completed. I am advised that the analysis is well advanced. Further work is being done to help the risk analysis panel finalise the process as quickly as possible. The advice of the Director of Quarantine, however, is that, while these controls address the quarantine risks, it is important to emphasise that prawns have been imported, as I said, for decades, and that there is no scientific evidence to suggest that the use of green prawns as bait has led to the introduction of disease. As I outlined, interim additional restraints were put in place both late last year and early this year in relation to the specific issue of imports from Vietnam allegedly causing problems. I hope I can get more information on that in the near future and will report further to the Senate.

Senator WOODLEY (Queensland)—I thank the minister for his answer, particularly in relation to the import risk analysis. I would just like to press that a little further in my supplementary question, Madam President. Is it true, Minister, that the import risk analysis for prawns was developed during consultation between AQIS and the Thai government prior to its release in Australia? Is this another example of trade considerations being given more weight by AQIS than protection of the Australian environment and our own domestic prawn industry?

Senator HILL (South Australia—Minister for the Environment and Heritage)—Not according to my brief. It was commenced after the use of uncooked prawns as bait was identified as a quarantine risk in 1996. According to this brief, a process has been developed since. So the objective has been primarily to ensure that products that are imported to Australia are safe both for human consumption and in terms of the broader environment.