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SEA CONTAINER CLEANING STANDARDS

Purpose

This information is about AQIS container external cleanliness standards for the international shipping and forwarding trade, and provides guidance to minimise the transmission of exotic pests and diseases to Australia.

Who is this information for?

This notice is of particular interest to customs brokers, freight forwarders, transport companies, shipping lines, stevedores and any other operators in the supply and logistics chain that have control of sea containers from the discharge port to delivery.

Sea container hygiene

What do we mean when we talk about sea container hygiene?

Sea container hygiene is exactly that – hygiene of sea containers. In this context we are talking about shipping containers, specifically clean shipping containers.

Clean shipping containers are those containers that arrive in Australia free from contaminants and other biosecurity risks.

What do we mean when we talk about biosecurity?

In a quarantine context, the practice of biosecurity in Australia means that AQIS (in partnership with clients, stakeholders and industry) has implemented a set of measures designed to reduce the risk of transmission of exotic pests and/or diseases via import or export pathways. Schemes to ensure sea container hygiene are just one of those measures.

Background

The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) is improving the way it carries out sea container inspections. Over the last decade AQIS has inspected more than ten million sea cargo containers and recorded the inspection results. This information has enabled AQIS to improve their processes and focus resources on identifying and inspecting containers coming from countries that pose a higher than normal biosecurity risk, and those that are destined for Australia's sensitive regional and rural areas. These improvements allow shipping containers that pose a nil or low biosecurity risk to move more quickly and efficiently through the wharf clearance process.

This new approach stems from [One biosecurity: a working partnership review](#) (the Beale Review), a major independent review of Australian biosecurity arrangements conducted in 2008. The Beale Review recommended that the government focus resources on areas of highest biosecurity risk rather than unproductively inspecting cargo of negligible risk.

The government's acceptance of the Beale recommendations is not about reducing biosecurity vigilance or staff. AQIS intends to strengthen Australia's biosecurity system so we can tackle the increasing biosecurity risks posed by travel, climate change and other factors.

What is the risk?

Shipping containers are essentially transport mediums for exotic pests, diseases or other contaminants. Insects can hitchhike to Australia attached to the surfaces of containers or located in the many nooks and crevices available on a shipping container.

AQIS has produced a leaflet series indicating the main types of contaminants found on shipping containers:

- Insects** – a range of insects can lodge themselves or build nests on shipping containers including ants, wasps, bees, beetles, moths and spiders.



[Ants, wasps and bees found on shipping containers PDF \[515kb\]](#)



[Beetles found on shipping containers PDF \[488kb\]](#)



[Moths \(Lepidoptera\) found on shipping containers PDF \[401kb\]](#)



[Spiders found on shipping containers PDF \[552kb\]](#)

- Snails** – exotic snails such as the Giant African Snail and other snail species are often found on shipping containers



[Snails found on shipping containers PDF \[663kb\]](#)

- Animals** – rodents, geckos and toads are the main vertebrates found in and on shipping containers. Animal matter also found on shipping containers includes animal and bird faeces, bones, skin and hair.



[Vertebrates found on shipping containers PDF \[435kb\]](#)

- **Plants** – plants can grow on shipping containers if residual seed has been allowed to germinate with or without contaminating soil. Other plant matter found on shipping containers includes leaves and other plant parts.



[Plants found on shipping containers PDF \[546kb\]](#)

- **Soil** - soil and soil related contaminants, can be found on shipping containers that haven't been cleaned, or have been managed poorly after cleaning.



[Soil contaminants found on shipping containers PDF \[579kb\]](#)

- **Fungi** – when containers are left in damp, dark conditions fungi and other airborne spores can lodge and grow on the residual soil left on surfaces of a shipping container.

No leaflet available

Cleaning containers and then keeping them clean can be a challenging process for overseas suppliers and wharves. While every effort may be made to clean a container, poor management afterwards can allow the container to be recontaminated. If little or no effort is made to clean the container before it leaves the loading port then there is a risk of introducing an exotic pest or disease via this pathway.

What's happening?

In line with the Beale Review, AQIS has changed its intervention policy regarding sea containers to better target those that pose a higher quarantine risk. Rather than checking every sea container, AQIS is targeting containers that are approaching Australia via higher risk pathways by:

- inspecting or intervening in all containers going to or through rural areas
- inspecting containers from high risk ports e.g. those which have Giant African Snail or other significant quarantine pests
- checking containers over particular periods to collect data
- increasing surveillance around wharf areas and empty container yards for insects and other unwanted pests.



AQIS continue to have officers at all wharf gates (usually during business hours) inspecting the sides of targeted containers to ensure compliance with container hygiene requirements.

An officer looking at a container will visually assess the container (pictured), and if contaminants are found, make an instant decision whether the officer can remove the contaminant easily and quickly or not.

Officers pay particular attention to the following areas:

- along bottom rails of containers
- within forklift pockets
- in and around the twist lock fittings
- underside and cross members
- container tops where necessary

AQIS categorises contamination levels on shipping containers into two types, [Low Level Contamination](#) and [High Level Contamination](#).

Low level contamination (non-actionable)

Low level contamination can be defined as small amounts of soil of sufficient depth that can be removed immediately or within five minutes, with minimal effort or use of equipment. Containers that have low levels of contamination completely removed from them will be allowed to exit the wharf gate without any further quarantine intervention at that point.



High level contamination (actionable)

A high level of soil contamination is defined as being of such a depth and quantity that the inspecting AQIS officer cannot easily remove the soil adhering to the container, is inaccessible, is of a high volume or quantity and is imbedded or attached to a degree that only mechanical (e.g. high pressure cleaning) methods can be employed to remove the contamination.

Containers with high levels of contamination are directed to a quarantine approved premises for treatment/cleaning prior to release back into the import pathway.

What you can do to help

Measures that can be put in place offshore include:

1. ensuring ports of loading have effective means to clean shipping containers prior to loading (pictured)
2. to minimise the risk of recontamination, ensuring cleaned containers are stored in a clean area prior to loading (see images)
3. ensuring cleaned containers are not re-contaminated in transit to the ship, prior to loading
4. increasing sea container hygiene awareness with overseas clients and offshore container processing facilities.



What will happen if these basic guidelines are not followed?

If shipping containers continue to arrive in Australia contaminated then the highest risk is that an exotic pest or disease will be introduced. When detected at the wharf gate, containers with high levels of contamination will be directed to a quarantine approved premises for treatment, or if the risk is considered too great to manage on shore, the container will be re-exported. This will mean delays in delivery and increased costs for the client.

Continual non-compliance on a particular sea cargo pathway will result in increased targeted surveillance and AQIS intervention and/or possible placement on the AQIS Country Action List. Placement on this list means that containers from this pathway undergo 100 per cent mandatory six-sided inspections on arrival.

Guideline standards for AQIS container inspection stands

- [Guideline standards for AQIS container inspection stands](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

- [Frequently asked questions](#)

Where do I find further information?

Further information about AQIS sea container hygiene requirements can be obtained by contacting:

- [your local AQIS office](#) or
- the [AQIS Sea Cargo Program](#) in Canberra or phone 02 6272 4938.