

[Citrus Australia](#) is the Industry Representative Body (IRB) for citrus growers nationwide.

Based in Mildura, Victoria, Citrus Australia is a non-profit company limited by guarantee that was reformed in 2008, and today is supported by over 300 grower and affiliate members.

Citrus Australia is governed by an enthusiastic skills-based [board](#) comprising of four grower member directors and two independent directors. It facilitates [eleven committees](#) comprised of growers and industry-based specialists representing major growing regions, with a focus on key industry issues.

Operations are managed by a small, dedicated and passionate [team](#) of people, working to both develop the citrus industry, and provide services to growers.

Citrus Australia facilitates market access for growers and export expansion by eradicating barriers to export markets through Government liaison; driving the Australian Citrus Quality Standards to maintain fruit quality; and developing more effective export promotion programs.

Government advocacy is a focal point for reliable access to irrigation, as well as skilled unskilled labour. Citrus Australia has a strong focus on biosecurity and surveillance, access to safe and sustainable chemicals, and coordination of industry research and development.

Citrus Australia makes the following observations on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic by Agriculture Victoria.

Initial response

- As a sector, the agriculture and horticulture industries would rightly feel there has been a lack of engagement or leadership by the Minister for Agriculture, the Hon Jaclyn Symes.
- Citrus Australia made approaches to the Minister's office during the initial phases of COVID-19 restrictions being implemented at a federal level, seeking to engage with the Minister, and requesting to be notified if there was to be any industry engagement such as a working group, or regular email updates. We did not receive any reassurance over the phone, and received no response to our request to meet or to receive any kind of communications from the Minister or Department. This was of no surprise given that countless requests to meet or converse in any way in the past 12 months with the Minister have been ignored.
- The agriculture and horticulture industries are recognised as critical services however, the Minister has not been sighted as issues have arisen in several agriculture industry businesses. Approximately 25 per cent of citrus is produced in Victoria, primarily in the Murray Valley region around Mildura, but also all along the Victorian border with New South Wales, as far as Eurobin in the east of Victoria.
- Agriculture Victoria did not form a consultation group with affected industry parties until three weeks after the pandemic was declared, and staff at Citrus Australia were not notified despite requests.
- To our knowledge, no emergency management centre was established to engage industry to prepare for COVID-19. In contrast, Queensland Government promptly set up a control centre and established connections with industry; the Queensland Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries the Hon Mark Furner regularly attended these meetings.
- The Victorian consultation group formed was very high level; chairpersons of peak industry bodies (PIBs) by invitation. It is our view that the response to COVID-19 is an ongoing operational matter and that most chairpersons of PIBs are not involved at that level, nor should they be. This group later evolved to include CEOs and other staff.

- COVID-19 impacts needed to be considered across the supply chain and this took too long to evolve. Given the highly transmissible nature of COVID-19, more was expected from state government in the form of engagement with industry to ensure the risk of transmission was being addressed, and actively minimised.
- The above circumstances and events likely contributed to the delay in composition of health plans, and resourcing PIBs to provide adequate advice to industry.
- In other forums (nationally) PIBs contributed advice on a range of issues and were part of the development of the response. The Victorian briefings were very high level and were not effective in getting to the operational detail that was required urgently.
- Despite advice to the contrary, Agriculture Victoria's initial focus and resource were put in to developing an employment site which duplicated the National Harvest Labour Information Service (NHLIS).
- Federal and state governments were out of sync in their announcements of policy; bans on the movement of Working Holiday Makers were clumsy and caused great confusion in the industry.
- Despite ongoing issues in some businesses where working in close proximity was required, no clear policy or guidelines were shared with our industry and presumably not with any other industry.
- Communications from Agriculture Victoria were very few, the COVID-19 Stakeholder Reference Group has delivered very little output apart from the meeting minutes. In the weeks following the Cedar Meats outbreak, Citrus Australia requested learnings from Agriculture Victoria that could be adapted to assist businesses in the industry to avoid this happening again. We are not aware of any useful information being shared from this that we could use to educate growers.
- The Agriculture Victoria meetings, whilst well run, were until late July held by teleconference; when other technology exists, it was frustrating as a participant when the calls were frequently interrupted by 'on hold music' and used valuable time covering the roll call. Video conferencing provides more control over these matters, allows attendees to raise their hand to speak, to share information in the comments, or ask questions and have valuable input when they are having difficulty being heard.

Current response

- Citrus Australia acknowledges that agribusiness was declared an essential service however in our view this is something that should have been agreed in advance of any such incursion; industries that provide basic human needs should know their status as an integral part of the fabric of society. Many small businesses in our industry suffered unnecessary stress attempting to find out what the industry status was and to whom it applied, when all they wanted to do was follow the rules.
- Premier Daniel Andrews' approach to the pandemic has been measured. His decision to declare a state of emergency protected regional Victoria.
- The approach to the 'second wave' and the lockdown of Melbourne and Mitchell Shires has been the right approach. Locking down only hotspots in Melbourne so the rest of the state can continue to operate businesses and day to day life has made operation of agribusiness smoother whilst managing the risk. One criticism that could be raised is that more could have

been done to restrict access to regional Victoria from the hotspots during the school holidays which may have contributed to clusters forming in regional Victoria.

- Communication and assistance from Agriculture Victoria to industry seems to be entirely limited to broadacre and livestock – to our knowledge there is no reference to horticulture in any general or COVID-19 communication.

Conclusions

Agriculture Victoria has not adequately recognised the importance of the horticulture industry as a food source to the State of Victoria. They have not identified the risks in some parts of the supply chain that cannot avoid working in close contact, and therefore they have not sufficiently supported industry.

Citrus Australia has provided COVID-19 guidance to industry since March 2020 and very little of that advice has come exclusively from Agriculture Victoria because no such advice has existed in our view.

Recommendations

- As a priority, Federal and State Government agree on the industries that are critical. Give consideration for developing a classification, such as 'Critical Service – Food Production', and list occupations that would be exempt and allowed to travel for essential work purposes, assuming they meet all other criteria.
- Governments work to minimise the variations in state rules and application of laws to allow smooth transition between states for those involved in Critical Service – Food Production.
- All businesses be required to submit a COVID-19 health plan to the health department. This would act as a reminder of COVID-19 transmission intervention in the workplace and put all businesses on a level playing field; when businesses interact they would have a clear understanding that their level of safe practice is acceptable.