

Addendum to Comments on Planned Changes to the Greenhouse Certification Program

Proposal for Replacement of List of Excluded Plants with a List of Authorized Plants

Summary

The proposed change to the Canadian Greenhouse Certification Program (CGCP) to add a list of authorized plants will have a devastating effect on our business, forcing us to drastically curtail our current plant offerings to U.S. customers. Of more than 600 varieties that we grow, 82% will be affected: 27% are not on the proposed authorized list and 55% are on the list but have new production restrictions of which we don't know enough to be sure that we can meet them. In this addendum to our previously submitted comments, we provide a list of plants that we grow but are not on the proposed authorized list.

Background

Following our first submission of comments on the proposed changes to the CGCP, I received a phone call from Dawn Miller-Cormier, Chief, National Greenhouse Pest Strategy, CFIA. We discussed the proposed changes at length and then agreed that I would submit a list of plants that we grow and ship to the United States that are not on the proposed list of authorized plants. I understand that amendments to the proposed list are possible as the result of this consultation.

List of Plants Not on the Proposed List of Authorized Plants

Accompanying this document is a list of Richters Herbs plants that are not found on the proposed list of authorized plants. Ms. Miller-Cormier suggested that we submit our list organized by family only. But on reflection I conclude that such a list would be inadequate because we are growing plants of many genera that belong to approved families but are not listed on the proposed list of genera. The proposed list is constructed with granularity at the genus level, with some finer granularity at the species level. Submitting a list of just the missing families may result in a mistaken impression that the listed families are adequately covered by the proposed listed genera. Being that the criteria and process for deciding which plants go on the list have not been described, we prefer not to take the chance that a list of missing families only could result in many of our plants being overlooked.

Although our list missing plant is presented by genera, we also include the families to which they belong. We present our list intending – where possible – that the whole of each family listed ought to be included in the authorized list, not just the missing genera listed.

We also include a few genera that are found on the current excluded list. These include genera from the Rutaceae, among others. Our position is that the current excluded list goes too far by excluding whole families of important herbs when only certain genera of importance to U.S. agriculture require protection. For example, we understand why Citrus should be excluded but we do not understand why Ruta and Murraya need to be excluded also, especially considering that plants grown under the CGCP are closely monitored for pests and disease. By including these currently excluded genera on our list we intend that these genera ought to be reviewed for possible inclusion on the authorized list.

Review Process

A key goal of the program should be to encourage more growers to join. But the process by which plants are excluded or included on the list of authorized plants is of critical importance. If the process is overly conservative and too many plants are excluded from the list then growers will drop out, and fewer new growers will join.

Little of the review process is described in the proposal but Ms. Miller-Cormier provided some details in our conversation: that there is a review committee composed of experts from government and academia; that it has met for three years to develop this list; that a number of plants were considered and excluded from the list; and that a number of criteria were used such as, she believes, potential as vectors for disease and pests and invasiveness. She did not know whether there are available any transcripts or reports, any guidelines the committee operated by, or if there is a list of rejected plants. These are critical for understanding the workings of the committee and how restrictive the approval process for new plants will be.

With so little known about the review process, it is inappropriate for us to embrace the proposed changes. So much depends on this review process. If the process is overly conservative, or if it takes too long, or if it costs too much, then the CGCP will cease to be effective for some growers including Richters.

Also, if review committee had no representation from industry, particularly from those most likely to be affected, then that suggests that the review was flawed from the beginning.

Rationale for Changes

In our earlier comments we asked why changes are needed and why the current exclusion list cannot be improved. Ms. Miller-Cormier explained that the original purpose of the CGCP was to facilitate the movement of “low-risk plants”. She suggested that the program was never intended to allow the variety of plants that is currently moving under the program. If this is indeed the reason for the changes, this is vastly different than saying that there are some “ambiguities” in the system, as the proposal document states. The very fact that there is a discrepancy between what is written in the proposal and what is being explained verbally, is very big concern for us.

The current program has been in force since 1996 and operations like ours have built up substantial export businesses based on what is provided for and allowed for under the program. In our opinion, the proposed changes are far more profound than is necessary, and in fact will have serious negative effects that could be avoided, as would be the case if the current exclusion list is instead strengthened.

Possible Outcomes

If even as few as 5% of our plants is excluded from the list of authorized plants then a large percentage of orders from our U.S. customers will be affected. That is because the probability that an order will have at least one newly excluded plant on it will be more than 25%. For example, each plant of a six plant order of mixed plants could be chosen from among the 5% of excluded plants at a probability of 1/20. This means that the probability that none of the six plants is from among the excluded plants is 74% which means that 26% of orders will have at least one excluded plant. If the proposed list stays as it is now and 27% of our plants are excluded, then the probability that orders will be affected by excluded plants will rise to 85%. These calculations are based on the minimum order size of six plants.

If we use the average order size – 24 plants – then the respective numbers rise to 71% at the 5% exclusion level and almost 100% at the 27% exclusion level.

As the above calculations show, it will be difficult to service to our U.S. customers if so many orders are affected. It is important to note that most of these plants have been shipped to the U.S. for at least the ten years that we have participated. The impact is not merely theoretical or what might happen in the future as new plants are rejected, but what will happen immediately upon the implementation of the proposed changes.

If the changes are implemented, having such large effects on our orders, our options will become the following: 1) cease shipments of plants to the U.S. altogether with an immediate layoff of about a third of our staff; or 2) to revert back to the traditional phyto program. It is important to understand that a reversion to the phyto program is an all-or-nothing decision for us because there is no utility of shipping some orders under the CGCP and some under the traditional phyto program. It would be easier to put all orders under traditional phytos.

As I pointed out previously, and it is worth mentioning again, if growers drop out and revert to the traditional phyto system then, ironically, the potential risks to each country will rise, not decrease. Why? Because, as we all know, a single inspection of a shipment by an inspector on shipment day is not as thorough as regular monitoring and documentation that is required under the CGCP.

Final Comments

We are not so naïve as to believe that the goal of the proposed changes is only to tighten up the program a little and to address some “ambiguities”. The changes are profound and seem to be driven by an unstated larger agenda. Possibly there is a long term plan to implement “white lists” for all cross-border plant and seed shipments. Given that no specific examples or reasons have been provided to us to explain the need for the changes, and no reason has been given why the current excluded list cannot be improved, it is hard for us to conclude otherwise.

We very much want to remain in the program. We are prepared to participate in the process to revise the proposal if that will help. The program can achieve the stated goals with far less drastic changes.

Conrad Richter
President
RICHTERS HERBS