GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Plant Health Updates From AmericanHort

Jennifer Zurko

AmericanHort may best be known for its annual Cultivate trade show and advocating for our industry with the politicians on Capitol Hill, but they're also active in making sure that us horticulture folks have a seat at the table when it comes to plant health regulations.

Back in late October, AmericanHort's Kamron Newberry represented the specialty crops industry at the 2025 National Plant Board Safeguarding Meeting in Annapolis, Maryland. The meeting brought together state regulators, USDA-APHIS and other industry representatives to discuss ways to better harmonize plant health programs across state lines. Kamron's presentation, "Industry Challenges with Patchwork Regulations," emphasized how consistent, risk-based standards and early industry input strengthen both plant health and commerce.

"The meeting was primarily focused on harmonization of state plant regulations, especially as APHIS starts to look at deregulating certain insect pests at certain federal quarantine programs," Kamron explained. "For example, APHIS is starting to look at deregulating imported fire ant, which has been a quarantined pest since the '50s. So when quarantines go away at the federal level, states then have a decision to make on whether they are going to regulate the movement of that pest into their state or not."

As with any government program, implementing a change can be difficult and slow. Craig Regelbrugge, longtime industry representative on legislation and government affairs, told Kamron that "old federal quarantines die hard," so it can feel like you're in a hamster wheel. But the constant push for deregulating older pests (like chrysanthemum white rust) can allow room to focus on newer pests (like spotted lanternfly).

Another aspect to consider is that if the federal government decides not to regulate/deregulate a pest, the individual states can still legislate and enforce their own rules for plant health and that's when you get a patchwork of different regulations. It's not only difficult to keep track of them, but it significantly impacts growers who ship plants across multiple states. These challenges were the primary theme of Kamron's presentation.

"In our experience, federal programs have always been a way to avoid patchwork regulations because when there's an overarching federal regulation, all the states have to enter into an agreement with the one federal regulation," said Kamron. "When APHIS has determined that a federal quarantine no longer meets the requirements of a federal program, that's when it gets pushed to the states. They have the right to regulate the plants coming into their state, so that's where the dynamics really shift around."

AmericanHort's involvement with the National Plant Board for more than two decades has helped ensure that specialty crops have a voice on pest regulation decisions.

"We have always been invited to give industry perspective," said Kamron. "If there are consistent safeguards put in place for each individual state, and they also work for the entire industry, it's a win-win for both."

One of those wins Kamron talked about in his presentation were the regulations developed for the box tree moth.

"The box tree moth compliance agreement was a big win," he said. "How fast it was implemented, the involvement of industry within that whole process, and then its workability for the industry has been great. We would love to see that as a model for future pest programs."

Harmonizing between states

On the production side of things, Dr. Michael Martin, AmericanHort's Science, Research & Regulatory Programs Director, works with the certification program for nurseries and greenhouse operations, otherwise known as SANC (Systems Approach for Nursery Certification). The National Plant Board is also involved in implementing and managing this program at the state level.

If you're not familiar with the program, growers can qualify for SANC by fulfilling specific production requirements. Michael said a lot of growers already follow most of the standards—the program is just a more formal, documented process.

Since SANC was developed in 2016, the National Plant Board, AmericanHort, other industry members and the USDA have been working on alleviating some of the pain points and improving parts of the program. One of the challenges is how the growers are realizing the benefits after going through the trouble of filling out the paperwork—or rather, NOT realizing the benefits. Some growers are asking that the program provide more of an incentive structure that includes measurable results and financial gains.

"We're trying to balance the regulatory aspects of the program along with figuring out which benefits they do get," said Michael. "Yes, you're seeing the higher quality material, there are less disease incidents—that's all great and wonderful. But some growers say they'd be doing a lot of that anyway."

Some possible incentives that have been suggested are more on the marketing side. For example, the group has discussed ways to indicate on the tag or pot that the plant the consumer is holding in their hand has been grown under SANC requirements.

Michael said that adding more incentives and benefits to the SANC program has been a top priority that they've been working on since May. With so many stakeholders involved, it's a process that takes time, so new ideas aren't implemented as quickly.

"It's an extremely complex thing," said Michael. "We'll talk in a meeting and say, 'Hey, what about X, Y and Z?' Then we'll go talk to the states and see if the states are on board. Well, the states may come back and say, 'We don't like this at all. How about this?' Then we go to the growers and it's back-and-forth negotiations. It's not a speedy thing, unfortunately, but it is a top priority for us because we know if we don't get something out of this, we're not going to keep doing it." **GT**