

Plant Healthy Certification Scheme - soft launch, Pioneer Group and CV-19

The development of certification schemes for best biosecurity practice in the plant trade was proposed in *Protecting Plant Health: A Plant Biosecurity Strategy for Great Britain*, April 2014. Since then many dedicated people from a range of organisations and businesses have contributed to the development of the Plant Health Management Standard and the Plant Healthy Certification Scheme.

On 20 February 2020, the Plant Healthy Certification Scheme was soft launched at the Plant Health Alliance Conference at Kew Botanic Gardens. The launch of the scheme has required much planning, agreement, fundraising and work. Multiple parties from a range of backgrounds are working together, often for the first time. The achievements of all concerned are considerable and include:

- Plant Health Management Standard
- Plant Healthy Self-assessment tool
- Detailed scheme documentation and auditing protocols
- Continued checking and testing of the above
- Formation of a governing body and appointment of the certification bodies
- Five training modules on plant health and biosecurity
- Training and validation of auditors

It was anticipated that an initial pioneering cohort of engaged and innovative horticultural businesses, many of whom helped develop the scheme, would quickly become certified. We termed this group the Pioneer Group.

We planned that the initial six-month period would be a phase where the Pioneer Group would work with auditors, technical managers from the certification bodies, the scheme manager and the governing body to 'bed in' the scheme. The concept was that the Pioneer Group would meet fully the Plant Health Management Standard requirements whilst supporting the scheme's inception by working with the scheme manager and certification bodies to iron out any roll out issues.

Unfortunately, a few weeks after the launch of the scheme, CV-19 halted audits and both businesses and certification bodies understandably furloughed key staff. With the restrictions on travel, remote auditing techniques were developed, allowing some businesses to receive a partial audit, with a site visit planned for a later date to complete the certification process. Additionally, an immense, negative economic impact is being felt by the sector from the necessary CV-19 lockdown measures. This has resulted in some horticultural businesses being impacted more than others due to the seasonality of the crop types they grow or trade. This has led to concern that a commercial advantage may be gained by some businesses as a direct result of the CV-19 pandemic.

This now leaves the scheme and the sector in a challenging situation, in that many businesses that had planned to be audited early on will, understandably, need to delay their audits (e.g. due to movement restrictions and/or finances).

To manage this situation, we have made three decisions. **Firstly**, extend the Pioneer Group phase by six months to 28 February 2021. **Secondly**, postpone the review of the Standard and scheme documents to winter 2020 / 2021. **Thirdly**, we propose that during the Pioneer phase, keep an up-to-date applicant/registrant list on the Plant Healthy website of all business that are (i) certified, (ii) remotely (partially) audited or (iii) have submitted an application to a certification body to become certified. The list will enable businesses to demonstrate to specifiers and purchasers¹ of plants that they are committed to adopting high voluntary plant health and biosecurity standards and to enable their commitment to be visible during the Pioneer phase. The pioneer phase will end on 28 February 2021.

¹ This document is available on the Plant Healthy website to communicate to plant purchasers and specifiers that there are a number of business that wish to become certified quickly and may be delayed in doing so due to CV-19 disruptions or due to logistics of training auditors to conduct audits during this early phase of scheme launch.

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