

Media Release



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Symposium puts spotlight on Myrtle Rust

This week over 200 scientists, government, industry and community representatives met in Ballina NSW to discuss an introduced disease threatening Australian native plants and ecosystems.

“Myrtle rust is an ecological nightmare,” said Dr Michael Robinson, Chief Executive Officer of the Plant Biosecurity Science Foundation, which co-ordinated the two day [symposium](#) which shared knowledge between groups working to understand the threat of myrtle rust and identify rescue operations for species at risk.

“Since the fungal plant disease was first detected in Australia near Sydney in 2010 it has rapidly spread along the east coast, and is now well established in native ecosystems in New South Wales and Queensland,” Dr Robinson said.

“In only a decade it has pushed this region’s once common native guava close to extinction and caused major declines in 15 other species.

Dr Brett Summerell, Director of Research and Chief Botanist at the Australian Institute of Botanical Science said Myrtle Rust has been shown to infect at least 380 native plants in the Myrtle family which includes paperbarks, tea-trees, eucalypts and lillypillies.

“As myrtle species are the dominant trees and shrubs in many Australian ecosystems, Myrtle Rust will eventually cause irreversible changes in many ecosystems,” Dr Summerell said.

“As well as being an environmental disaster, Myrtle Rust is a threat to any industries which utilise plants in the myrtle family, such as plant breeders and the developing lemon myrtle industry.

“Important species in Wet Tropics World Heritage Area rainforests are affected so tourism could also suffer.

“There are additional strains of the Myrtle Rust fungus overseas that are likely to be even more aggressive to our Myrtaceae species than the strain currently present in Australia, so biosecurity is critical.

“Western Australia and South Australia are still Myrtle Rust free so strict domestic quarantine which prevents the movement of any live Myrtaceae plants between states is essential to keep Myrtle Rust out of these regions.

“The spores of the pathogen are spread very easily by wind and human activity. Once established in a climatically suitable area the disease is very hard, usually impossible, to eradicate,” said Dr Summerell.

The symposium allowed key people working to tackle the impact of Myrtle Rust and to stop it’s spread to other states to come together to share insights and hear about the latest research on the disease from within Australia and overseas.

Speakers from Hawaii, South Africa and New Zealand provided updates on how the disease is impacting species and ecosystems in those regions and steps to manage those impacts.

Scientist from the Threatened Species Recovery Hub of the Australian Government's National Environmental Science Program presented the findings of research on the disease and how myrtle rust is impacting on environments recovering from Black Summer bush fires.

Following the symposium the Plant Biosecurity Science Foundation will be preparing a range of knowledge products and resources to help conservation managers and the community to understand this disease and what they can do to help reduce the impacts of Myrtle Rust.

The symposium and production of knowledge products are supported by the Australian Government's Department of Agriculture Water and Environment, the NSW Government's Saving Our Species Program, and the Threatened Species Recovery Hub of the National Environmental Science Program and the Biosecurity Collective National Symposium to be held in October.

Available for interview

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Photos

Photos are available for this story.