

## AUDIT

# Audit of measures to combat the spread of plant diseases and pests

Federal Office for Agriculture, Federal Office for the Environment

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## KEY FACTS

Helped by globalisation and climate change, pests such as the Japanese beetle have entered Switzerland and are spreading. Combating them and the damage they cause can carry huge costs, sometimes in the millions of Swiss francs. Through prevention measures such import controls or area monitoring, but also through the immediate and consistent implementation of control measures, major damage has so far been averted in Switzerland.

The Japanese beetle is one of around 400 plant pests that are classified as quarantine organisms in Switzerland. They are subject to a reporting and control requirement. There are also other invasive alien species, some of which have the potential to cause serious damage. Current examples are the Asian hornet or the quagga mussel.

In 2023, the Federal Office for Agriculture (FOAG) spent CHF 1.7 million to offset the costs to cantons and third parties of control and prevention measures in agriculture and horticulture. By 2024, this figure had already increased to CHF 3.3 million. Expenditure by the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) to combat particularly harmful organisms of relevance for forests, under the programme agreements with the cantons on the prevention and remediation of forest damage, is estimated at less than CHF 1 million for 2022.

The aim of this first audit by the Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) on this subject was to assess whether the current system to combat particularly harmful organisms is appropriate for tackling the impending problems efficiently and in a targeted way, and whether there are synergies with the combating of invasive alien species in general. For this audit, the SFAO focused on five particularly harmful organisms, including the Japanese beetle and the tomato brown rugose fruit virus (ToBRFV). Overall, the SFAO deems the current measures to combat plant diseases and pests as appropriate. However, there needs to be a bundling of available resources and information. The current fees for checking plant passports do not cover costs and must be raised accordingly.

## Targeted combat effort but not enough bundling of resources

The assessment of the selected harmful organisms revealed that efforts to combat them are generally well coordinated between the Confederation and cantons, and are efficient. The appropriate measures designated by the FOAG and FOEN are consistently implemented by the responsible cantonal services. Sometimes during implementation, and at the latest when the measures are completed, the actors involved jointly draw lessons and improve the control system.

The cantonal authorities often prioritise the combating of infestations. Yet it would be at least as important to retain or even expand the current prevention measures. The FOAG should therefore pursue the regionalisation of plant health services, as already agreed with the cantons, through an appropriate bundling of resources.

The FOAG and FOEN have engaged private companies to carry out various inspections. In one case, the fees for these inspections cover only around 10% of the total costs arising, according to the FOAG. Such a large discount is hardly justifiable, even when taking the public interest into account. Moreover, the current invoicing practice for these fees needs to be changed, as it is not in line with the Financial Budget Act.

## **Lack of harmonised information and communication**

The SFAO has recognised potential for using synergies in information and communication as regards particularly harmful organisms and other invasive alien species. Currently, only fragments of information are available. This is compounded by the fact that it is not always up to date, especially on websites other than those operated by the responsible federal authorities. As a result, it is unclear how reliable the information is, for example with regard to the current spread of a harmful organism in Switzerland. The receipt of reports on discoveries of harmful organisms is the responsibility of the cantons. The address lists published in the federal offices' web pages should be supplemented with a more direct way of contacting the relevant cantons.