



**Australian Government**

**Department of Agriculture,  
Fisheries and Forestry**

# **Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet**

## **Commonwealth Government COVID- 19 Response Inquiry**

December 2023

## Introduction

1. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet into the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

## Overview of DAFF

2. DAFF's vision is a more sustainable and prosperous Australia through biosecurity, agricultural production, and trade. The department's purpose is to work together to safeguard and grow sustainable agriculture, fisheries, and forestry for all Australians.
3. The key objectives are:
  - **Industry growth** - support industry to grow toward a \$100 billion agriculture, fisheries, and forestry industry by 2030 amid changing global market conditions.
  - **Biosecurity** - strengthen our national biosecurity system to provide an appropriate level of protection to Australia's people, our environment and economy from the biosecurity threats of today and tomorrow.
  - **Resilience and sustainability** - Increase the contribution agriculture, fisheries and forestry make to a healthy, sustainable and low emissions environment.
4. DAFF has a broad and diverse range of policy, program and legislative responsibilities supporting agriculture, fisheries and forestry production and international trade and market access, and significant regulatory responsibilities across exports, biosecurity, illegal logging, and agricultural levies. It has a large operational footprint, including at major airports and ports and in remote locations, and specific responsibilities in both animal and human health.
5. We provide regulatory services for many parts of the economy through our activities facilitating imports and exports of goods from and into Australia. Our staff work on policy, on-ground programs, regulation, economics, science and research, international negotiations, technical market access and operational programs. The department is a critical part of Australia's supply chain, facilitating economic growth, manufacturing and trade and market access for both agricultural and non-agricultural products in Australia. The department also advises on policies and helps farmers and rural communities in relation to drought and agricultural land and water use.
6. Functioning as the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE) at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the department's role intersected with all three themes of this inquiry: health, governance and social and economic impacts. Drawing on our experience and learnings, the submission will pay particular attention to the following aspects of the Terms of Reference:
  - Key health response measures (for e.g. across COVID-19 vaccination and treatments, key medical supplies such as Personal Protective Equipment, quarantine facilities, and public health messaging).
  - Governance including the role of the Commonwealth Government, responsibilities of state and territory governments, national governance mechanisms and advisory bodies supporting responses to COVID-19.
  - Support for industry and businesses (for e.g. responding to supply chain and transport issues, addressing labour shortages, and support for specific industries).

## Health response measures

7. The department was prioritising three areas of focus: ensuring the safety of all staff including those involved in critical front-line roles in high risk environments, directly supporting the Department of Health through the *Biosecurity Act 2015* to implement health measures for travellers and to facilitate timely and efficient import of key supplies such as vaccination supplies, RAT tests and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE); and continuing to perform its regulatory functions in critical industries (including food production and distribution).
  - The Secretary of the department is the Director of Biosecurity which is a legislated function under the *Biosecurity Act 2015* and shares responsibility with the Director of Human Biosecurity in relation to the management of listed human diseases and biosecurity risk.

### **Staff safety**

8. The department monitored and followed Commonwealth, state and territory Health and Government directions to ensure the health and safety of our staff. This was informed by government advice (including from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee) and health directives (State and Territory Public Health Orders), risk assessments, consideration of hazards and risks associated with our business and undertaking appropriate risk mitigation activities against an evolving risk appetite.
  - a. The department has staff located around the country in key import/export operations, such as airports, ports, meat processing facilities and other third-party premises (TPPs). Some of these establishments were designated as both high risk and critical for ongoing operations.
9. In line with state and territory health officials recommending people work from home, managers were asked to review business continuity planning and enable workers to work from home where possible, ensuring the continued safe and effective delivery of critical services to the Australian public.
10. The biggest impact to DAFF's day-to-day large-scale operations was experienced in Sydney and Melbourne. This was due to high COVID case numbers and community transmission in sites where our staff operate, the subsequent Public Health Orders issued by the State or Territory, and the logistical and safety consequences thereof. On a smaller scale, the department encountered significant impacts due to the nature of its operations, including the need to move staff throughout Australia and overseas to respond to staff shortages or critical regulatory issues. These impacts were compounded by many of the department's regulated entities setting 'bespoke' requirements in addition to those set by state and territory health regulators – including only permitted vaccinate employees to enter facilities, invasive biometric scanning requirements or limiting departmental employees to only be deployed to singular establishments.
11. Overall, the flow of communication and impacts felt by the department improved as the pandemic progressed and more and more businesses and Australians became accustomed to COVID requirements imposed. It is recognised however that at times the lack of availability of communication support meant agencies were duplicating effort to support campaigns for matters like staff vaccination and PPE requirements. Differing rules for each state/territory also led to confusion and significant delays in the delivery of advice.
12. As an agency with a number of critical workers, including many directly supporting the clearance of travellers and the provision of critical supplies, the requirement for

agencies to purchase RAT tests on an individual basis and not through a centralised process also created issues and delays.

13. The March 2020 international travel ban meant over 70 percent of biosecurity officers based at international airports were redeployed to other areas of the department or the broader public service (including in the States and Territories) following significant reductions in passenger arrivals.
14. While staffing was reduced, the role for biosecurity officers remaining at airports was extended. For example, biosecurity officers:
  - a. boarded every flight and played the on-arrival Health COVID-19 announcement and handed out the COVID factsheet to all arriving international travellers prior to disembarkation
  - b. at Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Darwin airports, played an announcement which outlined the COVID testing and quarantine requirements for each jurisdiction
  - c. at Brisbane international airport, undertook temperature testing for travellers departing Australia to Pacific Island Countries
  - d. scanned and emailed the Health Declaration Card (paper version of the electronic Australia Travel Declaration) to the jurisdictions for the purpose of contact tracing.
15. DAFF experienced increasing demand for services given border closures and lockdowns impacting trade in 2020, especially for goods under \$1,000 (which are generally consumer household purchases).
16. Isolation periods required by jurisdictions' Public Health Orders also reduced the availability of staff to attend premises to undertake inspections of both inbound and outbound goods as required.
17. Surge requests were coordinated through the APSC and at times there were issues experienced with relevant information not being passed onto the gaining organisation (e.g., preferred secondment start dates, employees' locations, equipment provision, etc). The notice period for the cessation of employees' secondments was also often quite short.
18. To ensure an uninterrupted supply of COVID-19 test kits, the Director of Biosecurity and Director of Human Biosecurity made an instrument under subsection 174(1) of the *Biosecurity Act 2015* (Biosecurity Act), titled the *Biosecurity (Conditionally Non-prohibited Goods) Amendment (Test Kits) Determination 2021*.
19. This instrument amended the Biosecurity (Conditionally Non-prohibited Goods) Determination 2021 to specify conditions that must be met before test kits could be brought or imported into Australian territory. In many cases, COVID-19 test kits can meet these specified conditions. Where test kits do not meet the import conditions, an import permit is required. This legislative amendment addressed a supply chain concern by streamlining the importation of these goods while still managing biosecurity risk.
20. To maintain export certification and regulatory responsibilities whilst also protecting our staff, DAFF organised where possible to conduct remote regulatory auditing. This ensured critical regulatory activities progressed whilst minimising the exposure of DAFF officers, with these measures becoming more embedded in both regulatory auditing undertaken by DAFF, but also with trading partners seeking to maintain the

trading relationships through remote auditing of abattoirs. It is important to note though that this was not always effective – with many international trading partners refusing to accept agricultural exports unless verified, in person, by a departmental officer. The department did also use the implications of COVID 19 in food inspections systems to progress the development, through the Codex Alimentarius Commission of a new international standard for remote audit and assurance in food inspection systems – using our experiences of COVID-19 in food inspection systems as a base.

21. Finally, and in understanding that whether to require mandatory staff vaccinations is a complex issue, the department notes that it, like all operational government agencies, struggled to develop a position on whether mandatory vaccination of frontline workers was required. For context, mandatory vaccination against Q-fever is a requirement for all departmental On-Plant Veterinarians and Food Safety Meat Assessors due to the known links between adverse human health outcomes (Q-fever) and employment in the meat processing sector. In the case of COVID-19, a direct linkage to place of employment and an adverse human health outcome was less clear, and a formal position on mandatory vaccination requirements within the Australian Public Service was not reached. Disparate state and territory requirements surrounding placements of vaccinated workers, compounded by industry or business specified access arrangements required careful management to ensure staff availability – which included understanding and confirming whether staff were vaccinated in order to deploy them for certain tasks.

### ***Biosecurity Act 2015 and support for delivery of health measures***

22. The department performs human health regulatory functions under the Biosecurity Act 2015, both as part of the duties of biosecurity officers and on behalf of the Department of Health and Aged Care, under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the agencies.

- Biosecurity officers undertake border measures including non-clinical screening and assessing of travellers at international air and seaports. These functions are aimed at mitigating the introduction, establishment and spread of listed human diseases (LHDs) and some other infectious diseases in Australia.

23. Decision support materials for biosecurity officers were amended to screen for travellers with signs or symptoms of COVID, arriving in Australia via both air and maritime pathways. Officers underwent training in new procedures, which was also subject to regular verification processes.
24. During the pandemic, and in the aftermath, the requirement to contact jurisdictional authorities on all COVID diagnoses, in some cases under different reporting protocols, caused some challenges and delays to traveller clearances. There is value in further regular examination of processes at a holistic level to ensure they remain appropriately risk based and minimise duplication.
25. The arrival of the Ruby Princess cruise ship tested the protocols for the management of sea travellers and the intersection of multiple Commonwealth and jurisdictional processes. As this was the subject of a separate Special Commission of Inquiry, the matter is not discussed at length in this submission.
- A separate independent review by the Inspector General of Biosecurity was also undertaken in 2021 which has prompted a number of refinements to border clearance arrangements.

26. These reviews and learnings from the pandemic more generally underpin a number of continual improvements to both legislative settings and internal processes, many of

which we continue to work closely with a number of agencies to refine and deliver, including:

- A strengthened biosecurity operating model introduced by the department and the Department of Health and Aged Care for international cruise vessels, to enable the appropriate sharing of information provided electronically in by vessel operators with all relevant port and health authorities.
- Implementation of an updated human health risk assessment process for international commercial vessels including cruise ships, consistent with public health requirements developed by the AHPPC.
- A review of all maritime guidance material for staff undertaking human health checks at the border.
- A new biosecurity training program rolled out to all operational staff to ensure they are well equipped to make robust operational decisions.
- A refresh of the Memoranda of Understanding with the Australian Border Force and the Department of Health.
- Improvements to the human health digital software supporting air and sea traveller clearance, including the Traveller with Illness Checklist.
- Legislative amendments to refine human health clearance processes for travellers, and annual reviews to optimise the legislative settings as required.
- A series of exercises to confidence test at-border delivery of critical human biosecurity functions for cruise vessels prior to cruise resumption, including all relevant Commonwealth state and territory agencies.

## Governance

27. In undertaking operational activity related to COVID and other health-related issues, the department relies on policy advice from Commonwealth health authorities, including the AHPPC.
28. During the pandemic, the governance processes generally worked well. The department was well engaged (often indirectly) in processes to inform the decision-making by the AHPPC and National Cabinet and the decisions flowing from it.
29. With respect to our responsibilities for human health under the Biosecurity Act 2015, the department continues to maintain close contact with the Department of Health to ensure appropriate governance and accountability mechanisms are in place for agreed areas of cooperation. Roles and responsibilities for these functions are set out in a Human Biosecurity Services schedule to the MOU. This Schedule is currently under revision and will incorporate emergency measures as an additional area of cooperation.
30. The department and the Department of Health and Aged Care jointly chair the Human Biosecurity Forum which meets at least quarterly and provides policy and operational oversight to ensure relevant, responsive and appropriate management of human biosecurity threats to Australia.
31. As an employer, the department found the experience of managing state vs federal government requirements relating to vaccination status to access the workplace challenging. For example, our post entry quarantine facility had both employees under

state government rulings such as contractors and staff employed under commonwealth rulings and staff were not permitted to be based in some designated airport zones unless they were vaccinated – even if they were not undertaking airport operations. Inconsistencies were clear when managing access to both sites.

## Social and Economic

32. In addition to the direct role in human health management at the border, the department played an active role to help manage critical supply chain issues.
33. The department was an active member of the Supermarkets Taskforce, established by the Department of Home Affairs to allow supermarkets to work together in a non-competitive manner to resolve supply chain issues to ensure that consumers were able to access the goods that they needed.
34. Industry cooperation was a critical component in stabilising consumer confidence, maintaining equitable access to food and minimising negative impacts, including health risks, for supermarket staff and customers. To assist industry confidence and the rapid sharing of information, the department appointed an ex-Deputy Secretary as an industry engagement touchpoint – funnelling information to various Inter-departmental and Ministerial Committee’s considering supply chain issues, food security and more. This provided a vital conduit of information between industry, the department and the broader government to assist targeted policy development and industry engagement.
35. Noting the effect of supply chain issues and the shortage of air and sea freight capacity, in April 2020, the Australian Government established the International Freight Assistance Mechanism (IFAM) to keep global air links open in response to the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. IFAM was a temporary, targeted, emergency measure to help Australian businesses deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.
36. The purpose of IFAM was to help re-build and maintain key global supply chains, protecting hard fought market share for Australian businesses and enable the import of items critical to Australia’s national interest, including medical supplies, medicines and equipment to support Australia’s health response.
37. A key feature of IFAM was the support it provided for international freight movements. This includes aggregating cargo loads, negotiating with airlines, working with partner governments to facilitate clearances, and improving transparency around freight costs during the pandemic.
38. By keeping key airfreight routes open, IFAM provided Australian businesses disproportionately affected by COVID-19 time to adapt their business models, adjust to a new and tougher trading environment and preserve jobs. The total cost of the program was \$1.04 billion.
39. To ensure the continuation of export agricultural goods, particularly in relation to export registered abattoirs where meat exports to key export markets are contingent on the presence of department staff, veterinarians and food safety meat assessors were required on premise and were provided essential worker status. Their continued effort minimised the impact on this section of the Australian economy which was of particular importance to the regional areas these abattoirs are often found.
40. The department also ensured ongoing regulatory compliance through auditing undertaken by departmental auditors who were required to continue to travel across Australia to meet legislative requirements underpinning certification of export prescribed products.

41. Labour shortages threatened ongoing supplies of horticultural produce, and the department worked with the Northern Territory government and other Australian Government agencies to trial opening the border for workers under the Seasonal Worker Programme. The success of this trial enabled the restart of the Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme to fill key agricultural and meat processing jobs.

## **Conclusion**

42. In many ways, the department continues to recover from the impacts of the COVID disruption, including re-building staff resources and capability. One of the positive step-changes from the experience has been the flexibility of the introduction of remote and new ways of working which for a large organisation with a wide range of responsibilities and skill needs, has been beneficial in supporting more agile and innovative workforce strategies and outcomes.
43. We welcome the Inquiry into the Commonwealth Government's COVID-19 Response and would be happy to provide further information and participate in discussions to support this submission and assist the Panel with its deliberations.