

October Senate Estimates – Opening Statement

- Chair, Senators, thank you for the opportunity to make a very short opening statement.
- We have run out of superlatives to describe this most challenging of years. It feels like we are in a different world to when I last appeared before this Committee in early March of this year.
 - Back then, we were still reeling from the Black Summer bushfires and the Pandemic was only just rearing its head.
- As the Pandemic has impacted our lives and our work, my department has continued to deliver essential services to the communities that we serve, and to our environment -
 - including assisting the government's responses to the bushfires and supporting major reforms in many areas, and working with our industries to mitigate the impact of the virus.
 - and also, we have redeployed 138 of our staff to support agencies including Services Australia, the Department of Health, Austrade and the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services.
- The impacts of this pandemic have been severe - Australians have been unwell themselves or have lost loved ones, been separated from their friends and family because of border restrictions, and many people have lost their jobs and businesses.
- We see our jobs in the department as critical to helping others keep, or get back, their own jobs and businesses.
- Our department has a large number of staff based in Victoria. There, and elsewhere around the country, many of our staff are at the frontline -
 - delivering essential services such as in biosecurity and agricultural exports - supporting trade flows while ensuring our agriculture and environment are safe from the threat of pests and diseases.

- My staff have supported our agricultural industries to keep producing food and fibre:
 - through measures such as supporting farmers to function through state border closures;
 - assisting with the government's freight solutions to export fresh produce; and,
 - supporting agricultural industries to get the workers they need in regional and rural areas.
- Our staff are making an important contribution to Australia's economic recovery from COVID-19 through their work on major project amendments under the EPBC Act.
 - They have also made a significant contribution supporting the recovery of Australia's wildlife and habitat following the Black Summer.
- Our staff in Commonwealth National Parks have continued to look after these areas of outstanding natural and cultural significance through these most challenging of times.
- And we are also maintaining a COVID-free environment in our sub-Antarctic and Antarctic stations - for the safety of our expeditioners in the most remote places on our planet.
- I'd also like to acknowledge the similarly significant efforts of our colleagues in our Portfolio Agencies.
- Chair, I am honoured to lead this department.
 - I'd like to place on the record, before this Committee of Parliament, my gratitude and thanks to the department's senior leaders, and all of our staff, for the work that they have done and continue to do, to support the government - and through it, Australia's agriculture, environment and heritage, and water resources.
- Thank you.