

**MICHAEL OUTRAM APM
COMMISSIONER
AUSTRALIAN BORDER FORCE**
Senate Estimates – 22 March 2021

OPENING ADDRESS

1182 words = 8 minutes

Thank you Chair and Committee for the opportunity to provide brief opening remarks.

I will provide an update on the Australian Border Force's current priorities, challenges and operating environment.

Importantly, the Australian Border Force is continuing to perform a key role in Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and supporting our economic recovery.

- The ABF has continued to support the non-health related COVID measures at ports of departure and entry, to facilitate the efficient and safe movement of travellers and essential goods across the border.
- We are working with Defence, Health and State colleagues to assist in managing emerging COVID risks from Papua New Guinea, including increasing our presence in Northern Queensland.
- As Australia's customs service, we are collaborating across Government and with international partners and key industry stakeholders, such as vaccine manufacturers, supply chain enablers and the World Customs Organisation, to facilitate shipments of COVID-19 vaccines, while ensuring border controls remain effective in identifying and intercepting fake, counterfeit and illegitimate medicines.

Due to their frontline roles on our border, many ABF officers have been amongst those in the phase 1A vaccine rollout. As part of this, 2,744 ABF officers (80% of officers identified for Phase 1A) have already volunteered to be vaccinated, which is an important step we can make towards the future reopening of Australia's borders, to help our industry and government partners to revive tourism and boost economic recovery. As at Friday 19 March 2021, 1,652 officers (or about 47 per cent of our staff in Phase 1A) had received a COVID-19 vaccine. These officers work in the airports, sea ports, enforcement and compliance areas across Australia and as part of our international network.

Safety:

To deliver our mission, our front line officers are often required to work in inherently challenging conditions, whether working at an airport, seaport, at sea or undertaking field and enforcement activity. The ABF recognises and is responding to the evolving and inherent risks in our operating

environment, for example the direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19. The ABF will continue to focus on workplace safety, and well-being, to ensure safe work practices.

Operating model:

As we progress through and eventually beyond the global pandemic, the ABF will remain focused on its operational delivery of services around the country, in line with the expectations of government, industry, our partners and the community.

It is now six-months since we implemented the first phase of our new operating model, which included relocating half of our Assistant Commissioners to Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, and, in time, to Perth.

A significant advantage of the new operating model is our increased ability to work with industry, and to support our staff in our major cities and regional locations with closer support from members of our senior executive in the states and territories.

I also wish acknowledge the appointment of three new members of our executive team since I last appeared before this Committee:

- Dwayne Freeman, Deputy Commissioner Operational Strategy and Coordination
- Malcolm Skene, General Manager Industry and Border Systems
- Vanessa Holben, Group Manager Customs and Deputy Comptroller General of Customs

Simplified Trade:

As part of the new operating model the Industry and Border Systems Group was established to focus on working across government and with industry, to identify ways to simplify and modernise the pathways through which we regulate the movement of travellers and goods across our borders and to support economic recovery.

The ABF is working closely with partner agencies such as the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment and Austrade to create a whole-of-government approach to de-regulation and modernisation at the border.

A Simplified Trade System will improve processes and enable better use of data to cut through inefficiencies, costs and delays at the border for Australia's 387,000 importers and 53,000 exporters. More efficient supply chains will lower logistics costs will likely grow the number of local small enterprises who export, improving the prospect of businesses of all sizes to employ more Australians

Border agencies are also working together to streamline sea and air cargo processing in the future, evaluating the potential to adopt more accurate and automated contemporary border screening technologies.

The Simplified Trade agenda supports our ongoing focus on customs and border reform. Our approach is to streamline border processes for traders as much as possible, while continuing to deliver on our responsibilities to collect revenue and manage risks.

Operational performance:

Australia's borders have remained open to trade throughout the pandemic. The ABF has consistently demonstrated our ability to adapt to changing circumstances at our borders to keep trade flowing.

COVID has seen a 97 per cent decrease in traveller numbers but additional health and screening conditions are manual and labour intensive, which has required us to retain a material presence at airports and ports.

In addition we have been able to successfully re-direct resources from traveller processing to targeting teams and cargo facilities. It has been highly effective, with a 70 per cent increase in drug detections at the border in the first seven months of this financial year compared with the same time last year. This includes an increase of 144 per cent in the overall weight of the drug detections.

Despite disruptions caused by COVID-19, the overall number of air cargo consignments increased substantially during the past year. In 2020, we processed 63.2 million air cargo consignments; up from 57.3 million in 2019.

Port activity also remains strong, with redirected e-commerce resulting in a 140 per cent increase in the number of consignments arriving by sea during the past calendar year.

Our enforcement and compliance activities have continued and we've been largely successful in navigating the operational difficulties presented by various state and territory covid-19 responses. Earlier this month, the ABF-led Illicit Tobacco Task Force destroyed its largest seizure ever – over 100 acres of illicit tobacco crop, worth an estimated \$84 million, across three locations in regional New South Wales and Victoria.

We led the Government's effort to address the scourge of modern slavery in Australian supply chains. The release on 9 December 2020 of the *National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery 2020-25*, and the first Commonwealth Modern Slavery Statement, demonstrates the Government's commitment to lead by example. And I am pleased that we have now published 673 statements from Australian businesses detailing their actions to address slavery risks in their operations.

Faced with the challenges of the last year or so, I am inspired by the dedication shown by our workforce who have continued to adapt to a new way of living and working. Because of our people the ABF has been able to respond with agility and flexibility. Those traits will be required again and again in the coming months and years, as we play our part in getting our international system of travel open again, whenever and however that begins.

With a resilient and committed workforce and through our strong operational performance, I have every reason to be confident that the ABF is well equipped to work through the coming challenges of COVID-19 and whilst doing so to help ensure a safe, secure and prosperous Australia.

Thank you.