

OFFICIAL

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Budget Senate Estimates – 24 May 2021

Chair, Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide opening remarks.

As the Australian Border Force nears its 6th anniversary, it has evolved as an integrated customs and border law enforcement agency. We will continue to play a crucial role in both protecting Australia from the global pandemic and in facilitating trade, contributing to Australia's post-COVID economic recovery. Our role at the border is both a complex and challenging one.

Achieving the right balance between facilitating necessary travel and limiting movements across our international border has been instrumental in minimising community transmission here in Australia, when compared to most other countries. Frequent adjustments are made, in line with health advice, to our border controls. The decision to grant or refuse a travel exemption is based on well publicised criteria and guidance. It is not a decision the ABF takes lightly and we are always mindful of the specific circumstances of every applicant and we often help eligible applicants to satisfy our requirements. But we cannot waiver from the Government's intention of protecting the health of the Australian community.

Each application for an exemption is unique and considered on its merits based on the information and supporting evidence provided. We make no secret of what circumstances are considered to meet the requirements, with my *Operational Directives* and *Commissioner's Guidelines* being regularly updated and published on the Home Affairs website.

Some media reporting suggests there is racial bias in our decisions, that were being either too lenient or too tough, or that we apply one standard for elite sporting figures and another for the community. I am absolutely confident that our people are making decisions that are consistent, appropriate and based on the criteria and guidance provided. Where we've made mistakes we have been transparent. In respect of elite foreign sports people or entertainers, they must engage with Australia's travel exemptions regime and they must satisfy one of the prescribed exemption criteria. In many cases they have also received support from the relevant state or territory government and undergo alternative quarantine 'above the caps', so as not to impede returning Australians' access to hotel quarantine.

Reopening the Border

The Prime Minister has asked that prudent planning be undertaken, to be ready for the eventual re-opening of Australia's international border, in a gradual and safe way, in accordance with medical advice and health assessments.

The gradual removal of restrictions on Australians travelling internationally and on foreign nationals coming to Australia requires a significant amount of preparation. This is because the re-opening of the border will be complex, subject to unexpected change and many moving parts as the international system of travel starts to re-connect. This requires continuous engagement with airlines, airports, international partners and other Commonwealth departments and agencies.

The ABF is on the front foot with these preparations. My officers are constantly undertaking planning activities, including scenario planning, so that were able to adjust quickly or incrementally to get people moving again safely, when it's time.

ALOs

The ABF's presence internationally, in stopping both criminal and biosecurity threats before they reach the Australian border, is an important element of our operational work and ABF Airline Liaison Officers (ALO's) are key to our preparations. ALO's save Australian taxpayers millions of dollars in compliance and enforcement activities, legal costs and government services, which would be required if illegitimate travellers were not stopped at their point of embarkation and were able to travel to Australia.

Simplified trade/Customs and border modernisation

Many of our officers are based at our cargo ports across Australia, enabling the rapid importation of legitimate goods into our country. From 1 July 2020 to 31 March 2021 we have processed 21.9 per cent more air cargo consignments and 201 per cent more sea cargo consignments compared to the same period in 2019-20.

In that period of time we have also increased our footprint at our air and sea cargo ports and international mail centres, thanks in part to a reduced footprint at many of international airports. This has led to 25,248 detections of major illicit and restricted drugs, an increase of 64 per cent when compared to the same period in 2019-20 and a 119 per cent increase by weight in detected illicit tobacco.

Supporting simplified trade is a key priority for the ABF, assisting business productivity, ensuring our supply chains are more secure and allowing the ABF to direct more attention on higher-order threats. The Government's continued investment will ultimately cut costs for importers and exporters, promote trade diversification, build economic resilience and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our border controls. In the 2021-22 Budget we have received additional funding to support the ABF's ongoing role as a key participant in the whole-of-government Simplified Trade System agenda.

Operational Performance

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, we have succeeded in keeping our detention centres COVID-free and in removing 765 unlawful non-citizens to countries across the world between 1 July 2020 and 31 March this year.

We have ramped up our civil maritime security monitoring activity, including in the Torres Strait; Maritime Border Command (MBC) is able to track up to 35,000 vessels at any one time. Between 1 July 2020 and 31 March 2021 MBC conducted 2200 aerial missions and approximately 12,000 hours of surveillance activities.

The ABF, the Australian Federal Police, New South Wales Police and the Australian Defence Force recently stopped the importation of 3.8 tonnes of brick cocaine and over one tonne of methamphetamine at sea, with a street value of over \$2.15 billion.

Foreign worker exploitation has remained an area of focus during COVID-19. Although there have been limited opportunities for temporary visa holders to enter Australia, some unscrupulous players continue to exploit onshore vulnerable visa holders. Operation BATTENRUN directly targets the exploitation of foreign workers and since 1 July 2020 has seen the ABF conduct 311 field activities.

The ABF will always strive to improve our operational results, facilitate increased trade volumes and make a sizeable contribution to Australia's overall economic recovery, as we deliver on our mission to protect Australia's border while enabling legitimate travel and trade.

Thank you.