Senates Estimates statement – October 2018
Dr Chris Parker

Thank you Chair.

Australia's primary producers want timely access to the latest chemical products to improve their productivity and the agricultural and veterinary chemical industry expects science-based, efficient and timely assessment of the applications they submit.

At the APVMA we are committed to our primary purpose, written in legislation, of protecting the health and safety of people, animals and the environment. The Australian people expect us to do a thorough job to ensure chemical products are safe – and that is what we do.

We don't always meet the legislated timeframe for the assessments and this is because we are thorough.

Half of our organisation is made up of scientists, and many of them have PhDs. These people know what they're doing when assessing whether a chemical product is safe and effective and we take the time to get the science right.

I know the committee will have questions regarding our review of chemicals, so I will talk briefly about our post market activities – to provide context for the work we do to monitor safety and effectiveness once a product is approved and is being sold.

Our legislation provides for a range of post market compliance and enforcement activities and we have a track record of taking action to support our decisions.

We undertake surveillance and testing to ensure the continued safety and effectiveness of registered products.

We manage risk so that Australian's can have confidence in the products they use.

The identification of hazards is a critical input to risk analysis and risk management.

When the International Agency for Research on Cancer released its report on glyphosate in 2015, it identified carcinogenic **hazards** associated with glyphosate and in their own words, the report served as a "red flag" to regulators charged with protecting public health.

Glyphosate required further evaluation of the risks connected to its use and consideration of the controls we had in place, which is why we undertook a comprehensive assessment of the 264 studies referenced in the IARC report, and a further 74 studies.

We evaluated the science, and on the weight of that evidence, we determined the products containing glyphosate are safe. Our decision was transparent and we published our findings 18 months ago.

I can assure the committee that where we identify a risk, we take action.

Just this month, we changed the label instructions for 2,4-D to reduce incidents of spray drift this summer spray season.

Our Chemical Review work has led us to take regulatory action to suspend labels, and through information received from our Adverse Experience Reporting program, we have changed label instructions on veterinary medicines. We issued cumulative fines of $100 000 to a chemical manufacturer who violated the AgVet Code.

Our regulatory service is delivered on behalf of all Australians to support productive agriculture, and to protect people, the environment, animals, and trade.

And while our job is not without challenge, we have found ways to improve our performance.

In the past financial year, our timeframe performance for approving applications increased from 69 per cent to 73 per cent.

Last quarter, our timeframe performance reached 85 per cent.

These gains couldn't be made without the commitment of staff in Armidale and Canberra.

There are, however, challenges ahead as we manage the risks around staff separations and new recruitment, knowledge retention, and work to upgrade our failing ICT infrastructure.

Timeframe performance will be volatile in the short to medium term.

For the APVMA, relocation serves as a catalyst to make changes that improve our regulation in the long-term.

Since we last met, the APVMA has opened a second interim office in Armidale, and I expect we will have 70 staff there before Christmas.

Construction of our permanent leased office is on track. The walls are up, the basement is complete, and work is underway on the top floor.

We will have around 150 staff in Armidale as planned when the permanent office opens in mid-2019.

As I have said at previous estimates, the move has not been without risks. That is why in July, I informed the Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources that, in addition to the core regulatory operations in Armidale, the APVMA would retain a Canberra Satellite Office with around 40 specialist scientists and decision makers.

Exercising the flexibility inherent in the Armidale business operating model will support the APVMA to continue to implement the Government Policy Order by relocating operations, while maintaining our current and future regulatory performance, which protects the

health and safety of Australians – and we will not lose sight of this through the relocation.

The expression of interest process for those Canberra-based roles is complete and staff have been advised of the outcome.

We are supporting ongoing Canberra employees to manage their career choices, in whatever pathway they choose – be it relocating, accepting a voluntary redundancy, or finding new employment.

I would like to once again thank my staff for their work in this challenging period.

In conclusion:

We are a small agency very much in the public eye. Some of that recent focus has been on our science-based decisions and our independence as a regulator.

We are proudly Commonwealth public servants – bound by the values of impartiality and accountability and we make independent regulatory decisions based on science and evidence.