

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Thursday 6 August 2020

Opening statement from the Secretary of the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications

Good afternoon Senators.

I would like to update the committee on key developments in this portfolio, since my last statement before the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee on 9 June.

At that time, I spoke about the unprecedented efforts and cooperation going on across governments, businesses, workforces and unions to keep essential services running, across sectors like aviation, commercial shipping and road freight.

That June statement remains a good explanation of our key activities at present, and I would like to table it for this committee.

There has continued to be intense pressure on Australia's transport networks, notably on our aviation, maritime, and road freight systems.

To support the continued movement of freight around the country by road and rail, the Government continues to engage with states and territories, regulators and industry as COVID-response measures evolve.

All jurisdictions that have border restrictions in place have exempted freight movements, as well as driver rest facilities. This kind of cooperation is vital to maintaining cross-border freight movements while also ensuring freight does not become a vector for transmission.

Cooperation has also been essential for the non-cruise maritime sector.

As an example, international crew changeovers are becoming more difficult, but agencies are working closely with industry to help it to better plan for these changeovers.

On the positive side, bulk shipping has continued with strong growth in iron ore volumes. Container freight volume is strong with some lines even looking at increasing services above what was available pre-COVID.

I have outlined in the previous statement tabled, the Government's actions to support the aviation industry through COVID, including funding to maintain a minimum level of aviation connectivity.

The Government has announced (in early June) the Domestic Aviation Network (DANS), the service for major routes, would be extended to September 30 and that the Regional Aviation Network (RANS) would be extended to 31 December.

The International Freight Assistance Mechanism has also been extended to the end of this year, supporting vital trade flows, including access for Australians to supplies of medicines and medical equipment, as well as the supply of over 60,000 tonnes of Australian goods to markets relying on them.

The Government has worked closely with the local aviation industry to provide financial assistance targeted at regional aviation to protect against insolvency, preserving their capacity for the recovery, and ensuring thin regional market connectivity is not lost post COVID-19.

In total, over this current financial year and the last one, the Government has committed more than \$1.3 billion to support our aviation industry through COVID-19 and to keep air freight moving.

The creative economy has also been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. In response, the Government has provided \$677 million in targeted support for the arts and creative sectors.

The loss of tourism activity is having a huge impact, including in some parts of regional Australia, many of which are highly dependent on tourism as their biggest earner and employer.

The \$1 billion Relief and Recovery Fund was introduced to support the regions, communities and sectors that were hard hit by this pandemic.

To support Australians working and schooling from home, NBN Co has boosted its capacity by up to 40 per cent to retail service providers – this was done free of charge, and has been extended to 19 September.

For those living in regional and remote areas, NBN Co has provided 45GB additional data for Sky Muster customers.

To provide guidance and help reduce uncertainty, the Government has worked through the National Cabinet, the AHPPC and other forums to develop formal protocols and principles for industry on how to operate in a COVID Safe way.

So far, across this portfolio we have delivered AHPPC approved protocols for safe air travel, public transport use, the private bus and coach sector, and for the National Collecting Institutions.

While the Government has been working hard with industry to ‘keep the lights on’, so to speak, we are also focused on identifying every possible opportunity to position Australia for economic recovery and job creation.

From mid-May to mid-June the Government announced \$3.8 billion in transport infrastructure investment.

This kind of infrastructure investment will support economic activity, employment, and will also help boost productivity and provide greater connectivity for people.

I would like to take this opportunity to again thank the stakeholders we have partnered with in responding to COVID-19, in particular our state and territory colleagues, and industry and union leaders.

I would also like to thank the people of our department as well as our portfolio agencies for their extraordinary efforts over a sustained period.

Thanks.