

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON TRADE AND INVESTMENT GROWTH**Chair: Mr Ken O'Dowd MP
Deputy Chair: Dr Jim Chalmers MP**—New Report Presented—****Business Experience in Utilising Australia's Free Trade Agreements**

The Australian Parliament's Trade and Investment Growth Committee today released its report entitled *Inquiry into the Business Experience in Utilising Australia's Free Trade Agreements*.

The Inquiry examined the experience of Australian business in using existing free trade agreements (FTAs) including any barriers that may be preventing business from realising the benefits of these FTAs.

On release of the report, Mr Ken O'Dowd MP, Committee Chair stated, 'The Government with strong business community support, has clearly been very successful in conducting and finalising FTA negotiations with partner countries including most recently the Trans Pacific Partnership.'

'Current Government negotiating processes, while successful, could become more transparent by having potential FTAs independently evaluated at various stages during the negotiating processes. This would increase public confidence, facilitate business planning, and assist government decision making during the negotiation process. Also, greater involvement of peak industry groups in the negotiation process would help ensure that negotiators are able to target the most beneficial outcomes for Australian business,' Mr O'Dowd said.

The Inquiry reviewed the outcomes of earlier FTAs and identified several potential reforms that could increase the ability of business to realise the benefits of FTAs. These included improving access for exporters to the import regulations used by Australia's FTA partners with the aim of providing information about all FTA partner countries that is detailed and up-to-date, yet also intuitive and easy to use.

The report's recommendations include:

- the Department of Agriculture (DoA) should continue negotiating with FTA partners to gain acceptance of the fruit fly-free status of particular regions of mainland Australia;
- the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) should review the roll-out schedule of the North Asia FTA Advocacy Program seminars and engage peak industry bodies in delivering seminars;
- the FTA Dashboard should be designed to enable easy access to country-based information and enable end-users to easily switch between the FTA Dashboard and DoA's MICoR database;
- the DoA should review the demand for 24 hour/7 day access to the export document hub and assess the feasibility of developing technology to meet such a demand;
- the DFAT provide assistance to FTA partner countries, where appropriate, to build their capacity to assess sanitary and phytosanitary risks;
- when the Government signals its intention to begin FTA negotiations with a trading partner, industry assistance should be targeted towards exporters who may wish to

achieve a market presence in the intended FTA partner's market before FTA negotiations are completed;

- at commencement of FTA negotiations, the Department of Employment should model the human capital and workforce needs in order to develop a workforce strategy to take advantage of the agreement;
- Austrade, in consultation with Australian business, should facilitate the development of an Australia brand logo and signage for exported Australian goods and services, and develop anti-counterfeiting measures for Australian exports;
- the DFAT should commission independent modelling of the potential benefits of a FTA before negotiations begin and this should be compared with a second modelling exercise undertaken after negotiations have been completed, but before signing;
- the DFAT should formally involve representatives from Australia's peak industry bodies, both employer and employee, in FTA negotiations; and
- negotiators from DFAT should remain involved in market access negotiations after a FTA enters into force.

The report is available from the Committee's website at:

http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Trade_and_Investment_Growth/Free_Trade_Agreements/Report

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