



Auditor-General for Australia



19 August 2022

Senator the Hon Matthew Canavan
Committee Chair
Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
By email: rrat.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Canavan,

**INQUIRY INTO THE ADEQUACY OF AUSTRALIA'S BIOSECURITY MEASURES AND RESPONSE
PREPAREDNESS**

The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) published the following performance audit report that you may find relevant to the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee Inquiry into the adequacy of Australia's biosecurity measures and response preparedness.

- Auditor-General Report No.42 of 2020–21 [Responding to non-compliance with biosecurity requirements](#)
- Auditor-General Report No.23 of 2018–19 [Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy – Follow-on audit](#)
- Auditor-General Report No.20 of 2021–22 [Human Biosecurity for International Air Travellers during COVID-19](#)

Information about what the audits assessed, concluded and recommended is attached. The audit reports are available online at www.anao.gov.au.

Should the Committee require further information in relation to these matters, my office would be pleased to provide you with a briefing at a time convenient to you or appear as a witness at a hearing.

To arrange a briefing, please contact our External Relations area at external.relations@anao.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

Grant Hehir

Auditor-General

Auditor-General Report No.42 of 2020–21 Responding to non-compliance with biosecurity requirements

assessed the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's effectiveness in responding to non-compliance with plant and animal biosecurity requirements.

To form a conclusion against this objective, the following high-level criteria were applied:

- Has an appropriate compliance framework been established?
- Are there appropriate arrangements to detect non-compliance?
- Is the use of regulatory tools in response to non-compliance effective?

The audit concluded that:

- The department's arrangements to respond to non-compliance with biosecurity requirements are largely inappropriate. In the absence of frameworks, plans or targets to determine the desired outcomes of its regulation, the department is unable to demonstrate that its response to non-compliance is effective at managing biosecurity risks.
- The department's compliance framework is largely inappropriate to support its response to non-compliance with biosecurity requirements.
- Arrangements to detect non-compliance are partially appropriate. The targeting of detection activities is not supported by a framework to allocate resources to pathways or emerging threats proportionately to risk, but there are partially appropriate processes to target individual items and entities within pathways. Key limitations to procedures, systems and the conduct of detection activities prevent them from fully supporting the detection of non-compliance. Departmental estimates indicate that some detection activities may have become more effectively targeted, but that undetected non-compliance is increasing.
- The use of regulatory tools in response to non-compliance is partially effective. The department does not effectively use the full suite of regulatory tools available and is not able to clearly demonstrate that the use of these tools supports the management of biosecurity risk.

The report included the following eight recommendations:

Recommendation No.1

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment implement a strategy and accompanying procedural guidance for its use of intelligence in regulating biosecurity by 1 July 2022. The strategy and guidance should establish how intelligence needs will be identified and prioritised, how information will be obtained to meet those needs, and how intelligence products will support the range of decisions made by the department.

Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.2

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment implement a framework to assess and manage risk across the entire biosecurity system by 1 July 2022. The framework should include, for all components of the biosecurity system: processes to assess both the consequences and likelihood of non-compliance; risk tolerances; review arrangements; and arrangements to escalate, communicate and prioritise risks.

Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.3

The Department of Agriculture, Water, and the Environment implement and publish a planning framework by 1 July 2022 to establish its: approach to biosecurity regulation; long-term strategic goals and approach to achieving them; and regulatory focuses for each year.

Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.4

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment implement improved governance arrangements for information system developments by 1 July 2022, to:

- identify and prioritise system redevelopment needs;
- align and coordinate IT redevelopment projects occurring separately to provide the greatest collective benefit; and
- improve project reporting to monitor projects against the intended benefits set out at project commencement.

Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.5

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment establish a performance framework for its biosecurity regulation by 1 July 2022. The framework should:

- include internal and external measures of effectiveness and efficiency for each biosecurity pathway and the biosecurity system as whole;
- identify how performance measures will be used to inform the department's regulation;
- ensure staff and executive training is undertaken on the requirements of the Commonwealth performance framework; and
- establish how information management issues will be managed to ensure appropriate performance information is available.

Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.6

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment implement, by 1 July 2022, a framework to ensure the resources allocated to pathways and threats is proportionate to the level of risk. This should align with the risk assessment framework in Recommendation no.2, and should contain arrangements for periodic review.

Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment response: Agreed, with request to extend timeframe implementation to 30 June 2023.

Recommendation No.7

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment implement a framework to support the effective use of the full suite of available regulatory tools by 1 July 2022, including:

- policies, procedures and supporting documentation for all available regulatory tools;
- arrangements to ensure regulatory tools are used in a way that is enforceable and consistent with procedural and legislative requirements; and
- arrangements to evaluate, monitor and report on whether the use of regulatory tools is effectively and efficiently managing biosecurity risk (this should align with the performance measurement framework outlined in Recommendation no.5).

Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment response: Agreed with request to extend timeframe implementation to 30 June 2023 for point 3.

Recommendation No.8

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment put in place governance arrangements, by 1 July 2022, to ensure that once agreed audit recommendations are implemented, the processes that have been implemented are reviewed and updated at agreed intervals, to ensure they remain fit-for-purpose over time.

Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment response: Agreed.

Auditor-General Report No.23 of 2018–19 Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy – Follow-on assessed the extent to which the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources has addressed recommendations from Auditor-General Report No.46 of 2011–12 *Administration of the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy*.

To form a conclusion against this objective, the following high-level criteria, reflecting the three recommendations in the 2011–12 report, were applied:

- Does the department have effective arrangements for recording, monitoring and reporting scientific surveillance activity?
- Does the department have reliable border operation data to inform border management decisions and measure performance?
- Does the department have a robust performance measurement and reporting framework to assess the effectiveness of NAQS?

The audit concluded that:

- The department is progressing but has not yet fully addressed the recommendations from the Auditor-General Report No. 46 of 2011–12 or the 2012 report of the JCPAA's review of Auditor-General Report No. 46.
- Through the implementation of the White Papers projects, the department is improving the effectiveness of its arrangements to record, monitor and report scientific surveillance activity and, in doing so, is addressing Recommendation No. 1 of Auditor-General Report No. 46 of 2011–12 and Recommendation No. 9 of the 2012 JCPAA report. To fully address the recommendations, the department should increase its level of assurance that surveillance activities conducted align to the risk prioritised in its target lists and risk areas.
- The department has begun to address Recommendation No. 2 of Auditor-General Report No. 46 of 2011–12 and Recommendation No. 8 of the JCPAA report. The reliability and management of border operation data has improved substantially, but the data is not systematically used to inform border management decisions and measure performance. The department does not have a risk-based approach to inspection rates and prioritising inspection activities in the Torres Strait.
- The department has not addressed key aspects of Recommendation No. 3 of Auditor-General Report No. 46 of 2011–12. The department has clearly articulated NAQS' objectives but does not have a robust performance measurement framework to assess NAQS' progress against its objectives and its effectiveness.
- The department has established robust management structures to support the implementation of the biosecurity projects funded under the White Papers. As at October 2018, four of the six projects were tracking well against time and budget.

The report included the following three recommendations:

Recommendation No.1

The department periodically undertake a robust reconciliation process to verify that surveillance activities conducted each year aligned with the risks prioritised in the risk area profiles and target lists.

Department of Agriculture and Water Resources response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.2

The department document a risk-based approach to inspections in the Torres Strait that describes the rate of inspections and how inspection activities should be prioritised.

Department of Agriculture and Water Resources response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.3

The department develop a relevant, reliable and complete framework of measures to assess its performance in managing biosecurity risk in northern Australia.

Department of Agriculture and Water Resources response: Agreed.

Auditor-General Report No.20 of 2021–22 Human Biosecurity for International Air Travelers during COVID-19 assessed the effectiveness of the management of human biosecurity for international air travellers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The audit focussed on the activities of Australian Government entities, including state and territory officials appointed under Commonwealth legislation. The audit involved the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment; the Department of Health; the Department of Home Affairs; and the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications.

To form a conclusion against this objective, the following high-level criteria were applied:

- Have human biosecurity operations for international air travel been supported by good governance?
- Have routine human biosecurity measures at international airports been effectively administered during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Have emergency human biosecurity measures introduced for COVID-19 for international air travel been effectively administered?

The audit concluded that:

- Management of human biosecurity for international air travellers during COVID-19 by the Australian Government has been largely effective.
- Human biosecurity operations for international air travel have been largely supported by good governance such as appropriate agreements and effective stakeholder communication. Arrangements under a 2017 memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Health and DAWE to respond to a human biosecurity emergency were not agreed at the start of the pandemic. Mandatory training was not completed by all HBOs and BOs.
- The administration of routine human biosecurity measures has been partly effective during the pandemic. Roles and responsibilities for enhanced health screening were initially not clear, and roles and responsibilities for exit screening were not aligned with legislation. While the introduction of electronic traveller with illness checklists (eTICs) has improved the effectiveness of traveller screening, regulatory records maintained by DAWE are unreliable and cannot demonstrate that BOs have correctly administered routine human biosecurity measures.
- The administration of emergency human biosecurity measures has been effective, other than a short period where roles and responsibilities for passenger processing into mandatory quarantine were not clear. Emergency measures were implemented in accordance with policy objectives and information-sharing arrangements were appropriate in the circumstances.

The report included the following six recommendations:

Recommendation No.1

Department of Health and Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications formalise responsibility for human biosecurity in external territories.

Department of Health response: Agreed.

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.2

Department of Health and Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment incorporate a schedule outlining contingency arrangements for human biosecurity emergencies into the human biosecurity memorandum of understanding.

Department of Health response: Agreed.

Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.3

Department of Health and Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment ensure that human biosecurity officers and biosecurity officers (both new and incumbent) have satisfied all training and qualification requirements.

Department of Health response: Agreed.

Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.4

Department of Health implement performance monitoring arrangements to ensure meaningful and reliable information on the performance of human biosecurity functions is captured.

Department of Health response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.5

Department of Home Affairs, in consultation with Department of Health, ensure that the functionality and enabling legislation for the Digital Passenger Declaration supports timely, large-scale contact tracing by state and territory authorities.

Department of Home Affairs response: Agreed.

Recommendation No.6

Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment ensure that traveller interactions under sections 44 and 45 of the Biosecurity Act 2015 are adequately captured in information systems.

Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment response: Agreed.