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Secretary Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment
Opening Statement – Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 Hearing,
18 August 2020

Chair

I would like to open by acknowledging the seriousness of this global pandemic, and extend my deepest sympathies to the Australian families that have been caught up in its terrible wake. It saddens me to think about the lives that have been, and continue to be lost, its impact on families, society, and the economy. There are efforts right across the federation and beyond, to keep people safe. These are indeed challenging and unprecedented times for us all.

In my department we have afforded this pandemic the highest of priority. Whether that be my officers working on the front line ensuring we continue to deliver biosecurity services; in providing certification for our important agriculture export markets; our people that have been providing valuable policy advice on new measures and programs to ensure that agriculture is recognised as an essential service in providing food and fibre to all Australians; or indeed the new measures we have put in place to protect vulnerable communities living in or near Commonwealth National Parks.

To that end, I would like to also acknowledge the great cooperation we have received from my colleagues across the APS, and my counterparts in the States and Territories—the Agriculture Senior Officials Group—in finding practical solutions to help keep our agricultural industries working in these very demanding times.

The latest impacts in Victoria, where my department has some 700 staff, continue to sheet home the ongoing challenge. Chair, I would like to pay particular tribute to those officers, as they are providing a truly outstanding service to our nation while abiding by the COVID-19 restrictions currently in place. I'd also like to acknowledge the wonderful support that our work health and safety experts are providing to us.

Can I also highlight the international leadership of Australia's Chief Veterinary Officer, Dr Mark Schipp, who is also the President of the World Organisation for Animal Health, the OIE. Dr Schipp is leading global work on reforming wild life wet markets, which have been the cause of at least two previous pandemics.

Chair, my department continues to improve the way in which we work with our stakeholders, and partners – we are not perfect, but we continue to learn.

The Committee is aware of the framework under which we work with the Department of Health under the *Biosecurity Act 2015 (Act)*. It is under this Act that I, as the Director of Biosecurity, and my staff perform the duties that primarily relate to the assessment and management of animal and plant biosecurity risks.

The Director of Human Biosecurity is the Commonwealth's Chief Medical Officer, who has general policy and operational responsibility under the chapter of the Act which deals with the prevention and management of risks to human health.

Chair, we have of course been awaiting the report from the *NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into the Ruby Princess*, which was handed down last Friday. It makes some important findings about a number of issues.

The report makes a number of findings in relation to the role of the NSW Department of Health.

In particular, I note paragraph 2.10 that states '*In light of all the information the Expert Panel had, the decision to assess the risk as 'low risk' – meaning, in effect, "do nothing" – is as inexplicable as it is unjustifiable. It was a serious mistake*'.

There was also detailed examination of actions of officers of my Department, and the Australian Border Force (ABF).

Importantly at paragraph 1.44 the report states "*The administrative arrangements by which the Commonwealth's Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE) interacts with the State's Department of Health are also described and evaluated, not entirely favourably: but again without major flaws. Overall the system on 18-19 March was workable.*"

The report has found, and we fully accept, there are some areas for improved action. Indeed, we have been working on these actions in close consultation with the Department of Health, and through them with, State and Territory Departments of Health ever since the health risk assessment experiences of the *Ruby Princess* and *Al Kuwait*. We are happy to share those actions with the Committee today.

Chair, your letter, to which I responded on 14 August 2020, raised a concern in relation to my earlier evidence to this Committee.

While my statements to the Committee were complete and consistent with my understanding of the facts at the time, I welcome the opportunity to provide further information relevant to the issues raised in your correspondence, and now in the light of the Commission's findings.

The National protocols relied on the systems in place in relation to health checks. I accept that the system which involved administering a Traveller Illness Checklist (TIC), as set out in the department's work instructions, was not followed. This was set out in detail in the Commonwealth's voluntary statement to the *NSW Special Inquiry into the Ruby Princess*.

I was told that the procedures in place were to rely on NSW Health's risk assessment, which were followed. I now understand that the local application of the protocols at the Port of Sydney, in relation to cruise ships, was for my officers not to administer TICs, but

to consult with medical officers on the ships to get notified of any health issues. I am advised that on this particular occasion our officer only relied on the NSW medical assessment.

I would take this opportunity to apologise to the committee if there is any perception whatsoever that I have misled, however inadvertently, the committee. That absolutely was not my intention and I am grateful for this opportunity to seek to clarify my earlier evidence.

Chair, in conclusion, I can understand if there is frustration in examining these complicated shared arrangements, and to work out who did what, or didn't do what, and what they should or could have done differently.

The Commission's report has worked through those matters in great detail.

The simple bottom line is that, very sadly, an overall system designed to identify and respond to risks– and which had worked well on other occasions –clearly didn't do that on this occasion. That impacted very severely on many people.

We were one part of that overall system, albeit very highly reliant on the expert health professionals elsewhere.

As I said previously, our primary role is in relation to animal and plant biosecurity, but we are also part of the human biosecurity framework.

We are all committed to learning from this very sad event, and are continuing to do so.

Thank you Chair