

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Answers to questions on notice
Agriculture, Water and the Environment Portfolio

Committee: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Inquiry: Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic
Question No: 1
Hearing Date: 18 August 2020
Division/Agency: Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment
Topic: 2017 Wendy Craik report recommendations
Question Date: 28 August 2020
Question Type: Written

Senator Keneally asked:

The 2017 Wendy Craik report Priorities for Australia's Biosecurity System made a series of recommendations, including:

Recommendation 2: The NBC and the Industry and Community Biosecurity Committee should, through an open, transparent and collaborative process, lead national consultation on a draft National Biosecurity Statement, such as that proposed by this review. The consultation process should involve all levels of government (including local government), industry and the community, with the statement finalised and launched within eighteen months of the IGAB review report.

Recommendation 25: AGSOC should establish, as a priority, an Industry and Community Biosecurity Committee as a forum for the NBC to discuss key national biosecurity policies and reforms.

Recommendation 38: The Productivity Commission should, commencing in 2018, undertake a comparative Report of Government Biosecurity Services (ROGBS) on a five-yearly basis. The report should draw on the existing framework provided by the Report of Government Services (Emergency Management).

Recommendation 41: The Australian Government should establish, within the agriculture department, a dedicated National Biosecurity Analytics and Intelligence Centre, to centralise, coordinate and provide advice to the NBC, AGSOC and AGMIN on biosecurity intelligence covering emerging risks and pathways and international and domestic pest and disease detections

1. How many of the recommendations of the Craik report has the Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment (the Department) implemented in full? Provide a list.

2. How many of the recommendations of the Craik report has the Department partially implemented? Provide a list.

3. In light of the Ruby Princess incident what steps, if any, has the Department taken to implement the recommendations of the Wendy Craik Report? Make reference to specific recommendations.

4. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, will the Department implement Recommendation 41 and created a dedicated National Biosecurity Analytics and Intelligence Centre, to centralise, coordinate and provide advice to the NBC, AGSOC and AGMIN on biosecurity intelligence covering emerging risks and pathways and international and domestic pest and disease detections

Answers:

1. Of the report's 42 recommendations, the Commonwealth is responsible for ten (recommendations 9, 12, 14, 15, 30, 31, 34, 36, 40 and 41). Four are complete or require no further action (recommendations 9, 31, 36 and 40), with implementation of a further five underway or ongoing (recommendations 12, 14, 30, 34 and 41). Recommendation 15 is dependent on completion of a joint effort between governments.

All other recommendations are either the responsibility of all governments and are being implemented through collective mechanisms, such as the National Biosecurity Committee (NBC), or are the responsibility of state and territory governments.

2. See response to question 1.
3. See response to question 1.
4. Recommendation 41 is being progressively implemented. Through the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper, the Australian Government invested in developing an advanced analytics capability in biosecurity. A skilled team is progressively sourcing data, improving its quality and integrating it to support biosecurity decision making. These improvements will enhance the existing data shared with state and territory agencies.

A data sharing protocol for sharing sensitive data has been signed between biosecurity Commonwealth and state and territory agencies.

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Committee: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Inquiry: Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic
Question No: 2
Hearing Date: 18 August 2020
Division/Agency: Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment
Topic: Biosecurity communication and process
Question Date: 28 August 2020
Question Type: Written

Senator Keneally asked:

1. Since March 2020, what measures have been implemented to strengthen communication and information sharing between state-based federal biosecurity officer, Australian border force and the state health departments?
2. In light of the Ruby Princess and Al Kuwait, is the Department aware of any other examples where poor communication has led to biosecurity incursions?
3. What processes are in place to ensure these failures do not occur again?
4. Is the communication breakdown the result of a lack of resources and funding?
 - a. If so, what additional resources and funding does the Department require?
 - b. If not, what is the cause of the communication breakdown?
5. Has the Department undertaken a review into the handling of the Ruby Princess?
 - a. If so, when will the findings be made public?
 - b. If not, why not?
6. Has the Department updated the National Biosecurity Statement to reflect the challenges posed by COVID-19?
 - a. If so, how? Who did the Department consult in this process?
 - b. If not, why not?
7. Has the National Biosecurity Committee convened to discuss national biosecurity priorities and reforms?
 - a. If so, what were the key outcomes of this meeting?
 - b. If not, why not?
8. In light of COVID-19, will the Department prepare a Report of Government Biosecurity Services?
 - a. If so, when will it be delivered?
 - b. If not, why not?

Answers:

1. From May 2020 the department participated in whole of government daily meetings on Commercial Maritime Arrivals. This forum allowed border agencies to communicate any issues and to discuss the protocols and arrangements in place ahead of vessel arrivals. This meeting is also attended by the Department of Health, Australian Border Force and Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Cities and Regional Development. This forum continues monthly.

In July 2020, the department and Australian Border Force implemented weekly discussions regarding vessel arrivals at ports across Australia. The discussions are chaired by departmental representatives and designed to bring government agencies and port authorities together. Relevant representatives are invited from the Australian Border Force, the department (biosecurity officers), Australian Maritime Safety Authority, port authorities and state and territory health agencies in each region.

The department has strengthened its communication processes for vessels that have been assessed as representing a potential risk for COVID-19. Formal assessment on arriving vessels is now required in writing from human biosecurity officers and then biosecurity officers advise representatives from the Australian Border Force, Australian Maritime Safety Authority and the relevant port authority of the formal assessment by human biosecurity officers.

2. No.
3. The department has taken several steps to improve processes and procedures relating to human health. The department has:
 - 29 July 2020, implemented enhancements to human health screening processes for commercial vessels agreed between the Commonwealth and states and territories:
 - i. Under the agreed enhancements, international commercial vessels are asked additional questions about the presence of COVID-19 symptoms in the last 14 days. Where a vessel indicates that a person on board has these symptoms, the department seeks written advice from state and territory health officials appointed as human biosecurity officers about the COVID-19 risk. The department communicates this advice to the Australian Border Force, Australian Maritime Safety Authority and the relevant port authority.
 - implemented changes to electronic forms for biosecurity officers who undertake inspections to ensure decisions around pratique are clear, facilitate recording of human biosecurity officer advice and to overcome issues related to the absence of network connectivity.
 - engaged external consultants to review the department's processes and procedures for conducting inspections of international vessels.
 - conducted further training in pratique processes, which will continue to be rolled out to biosecurity officers working with international vessels.

The department is currently:

- working with the Department of Health and other Commonwealth agencies to enhance human health screening processes for international cruise vessels (similar to those implemented for commercial vessels). These will be agreed with states and territories before being implemented.
- working with the Department of Health on changes to inspections processes and the Traveller with Illness Checklist for cruise vessels, including consideration of a checklist that can be conducted with the ship's doctor or medical staff rather than individual ill passengers.

4. As outlined in the response to Question 1, the department has taken steps to improve communication and raise awareness of the roles and responsibilities regarding arriving commercial vessels between Commonwealth and state and territory agencies. These improvements are being made within existing funding and resources.
5. An external consultant has been engaged to review the department's processes and procedures for conducting inspections of international vessels.

Whilst not specifically related to the Ruby Princess, the Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management announced on 23 August 2020 that the Inspector-General of Biosecurity (IGB) will be conducting a general review of the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's processes and procedures. The IGB's report will be publicly available once completed.

6. No.

The statement, developed by a working group of industry and environmental groups and government, remains relevant in highlighting the overarching roles and responsibilities within Australia's biosecurity system. Any changes to the statement would need to be made through a similarly shared approach.

7. The National Biosecurity Committee (NBC) ordinarily meets twice a year to discuss key issues of biosecurity policy and reform. Committee efforts are guided by a rolling work program focused on the priority reform areas proposed in the 2017 independent review of the national biosecurity system and agreed by agriculture ministers. This year, in addition to its two ordinary meetings, the committee has held two extraordinary meetings specifically to discuss specifically the impacts of COVID-19 on the national biosecurity system.
8. Agriculture ministers agreed the NBC would work with the Productivity Commission to determine the most feasible approach to undertake a report on government biosecurity services. The commission subsequently advised that this does not fall within the scope of its 'Report on Government Services' work.

In their response to the 2017 independent review of the national biosecurity system, ministers agreed understanding and evaluating – as well as public reporting of – the system's performance is key. Through the NBC, a senior officials working group, co-chaired by Victoria and the Commonwealth, is developing a performance framework.