

Chapter 2

Agriculture portfolio

2.1 This chapter outlines the key issues discussed during the 2014-15 Additional Estimates hearings for the Agriculture portfolio.

Department of Agriculture

2.2 The committee heard evidence from the Department of Agriculture (the department) and agencies on 23 February 2015 and 5 March 2015, meeting for a total of 12 hours and 30 minutes.

2.3 On 23 February 2015, the committee heard from the divisions and agencies of the Agriculture portfolio in the following order:

- Finance and Business Support Division, Governance Branch, Information Services Division, Service Delivery Division, Office of the General Counsel;
- Australian Fisheries Management Authority;
- Exports Division, Trade and Market Access Division;
- Compliance Division;
- Live Animal Exports Reform Division;
- Australian Livestock Export Corporation Limited;
- Meat and Livestock Australia;
- Interim Inspector-General of Biosecurity;
- Sustainability and Biosecurity Policy Division;
- Biosecurity Plant Division;
- Biosecurity Animal Division;
- Agricultural Policy Division;
- Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division; and
- Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority.

2.4 The following agencies were called to appear but later released during the course of the hearing without providing evidence:

- Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics;
- Plant Health Australia;
- Australian Egg Corporation Limited;
- Landcare Australia Limited;
- Australian Landcare Council;

- Cotton Research and Development Corporation;
- Fisheries Research and Development Corporation;
- Grains Research and Development Corporation;
- Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation; and
- Horticulture Innovation Australia Limited.

2.5 On 5 March 2015, the committee heard evidence from the Executive, Governance Branch, and the Office of the General Counsel.

Finance and Business Support Division, Governance Branch, Information Services Division, Service Delivery Division, Office of the General Counsel

2.6 The committee pursued information on the department's response to the recent outbreak of the hepatitis A virus linked to frozen berries imported from China. It focused in particular on the staffing levels of the Compliance Division within the department.¹

2.7 The committee sought to clarify the role of the Interim Inspector-General of Biosecurity and asked for further information on the consultative processes undertaken in regard to the *Biosecurity Bill 2012*.²

2.8 In terms of other matters raised during the session, the committee received an update on the bargaining process for the department's enterprise agreement.³

2.9 The committee also investigated in more detail issues relating to the department's handling of a 2014 freedom of information (FOI) request made by the Hon. Mr Joel Fitzgibbon, MP.⁴ The committee pursued this matter at a further additional estimates hearing on 5 March 2015.⁵

Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA)

2.10 The committee discussed AFMA's role in the regulation of illegal fishing vessels, including the range of actions available to AFMA when monitoring and apprehending vessels on the high seas.⁶

1 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 5-20.

2 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 20-23, 45-48.

3 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 24-32.

4 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 32-44, pp 67-68.

5 *Proof Hansard*, 5 March 2015, pp 1-18.

6 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 49-57.

2.11 The committee also questioned officials on the progress of red tape reduction initiatives in the commercial fishing industry and the methods deployed by AFMA to ensure the overall sustainability of fisheries.⁷

Exports Division, Trade and Market Access Division

2.12 The committee raised matters relating to the negotiation of the Australia-China Free-Trade Agreement. In particular, the department was asked about barriers to trade and the potential implications for agricultural workers in Australia arising from the labour mobility clause.⁸

2.13 The committee requested an update on the efforts to re-open Vietnamese markets for Australian fruit exports following a temporary suspension on 1 January 2015 due to concern over the status of the Mediterranean fruit fly. The committee also asked for information relating to the status of Australian kangaroo product exports.⁹

Compliance Division

2.14 The committee resumed questioning on the departmental handling of the recent outbreak of the hepatitis A virus linked to contaminated frozen berries imported from China. Officials outlined a timeline of actions taken by the department in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak and provided details on the multiple interactions between the department, Food Safety Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and the affected companies, as well as on the subsequent testing and risk assessments being undertaken.¹⁰

Live Animal Exports Reform Division

2.15 The committee considered the work being done on reforming the Exporter Supply Chain Assurance System (ESCAS), with particular discussion on the processes being undertaken to streamline the system, the methods used in the ESCAS review (released in January 2015), and statistics on animal welfare breaches.¹¹

Australian Livestock Export Corporation Limited (Livecorp Australia)

2.16 The committee discussed the challenges faced by members (licensed exporters and associated industry stakeholders) of LiveCorp Australia in regard to

7 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 58-67.

8 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 67-74.

9 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 75-79.

10 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 79-109.

11 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 109-115.

ESCAS application approvals and audits, and received an update on the research and development (R&D) projects currently being undertaken.¹²

Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA)

2.17 The committee queried MLA on complaints that the sheep meat sector is not effectively represented by the organisation and heard evidence on the ongoing internal reforms relating to MLA resource allocation in South East Asia.

2.18 The committee also discussed MLA's progress in implementing two initiatives which were recommended in the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee 2014 report into industry structure and systems governing levies on grass-fed cattle.¹³

Interim Inspector-General of Biosecurity

2.19 The committee asked the Interim Inspector-General of Biosecurity to briefly summarise the areas currently under examination. These included imported plant-based stock feeds, timber dunnage and packaging, and sausage casings.

2.20 The committee asked for an update on progress in implementing recommendations made by the Interim-Inspector General of Biosecurity since 2009.¹⁴

Sustainability and Biosecurity Policy Division

2.21 The committee received an update on the implementation progress of the agricultural chemicals and veterinary medicines (agvet chemicals) reform, and questioned officials about contracts for regional National Resource Management (NRM) organisations and future Landcare grants.¹⁵

Biosecurity Plant Division

2.22 The committee heard evidence on the incursion of red imported fire ants into New South Wales and asked for feedback on concerns raised by Thailand authorities about mixed consignments of fruit arriving in Thailand.¹⁶

12 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 115-118.

13 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 118-125.

14 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 125-127.

15 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 127-131.

16 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 131-132.

Biosecurity Animal Division

2.23 The committee raised the matter of new guidelines for imported ornamental fish testing. The committee then asked officials to outline the considerations that led to the decision to defer the new testing regime for 12 months.¹⁷

Agricultural Policy Division

2.24 The committee sought information on the current state of affairs regarding free-range egg regulations and questioned officials on the challenges of developing an enforceable standard for free-range eggs. The committee also discussed the department's role in supporting the creation of a national foreign investment register for agricultural land ownership.¹⁸

Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

2.25 The committee raised the topic of Regional Forest Agreements (RFA) and considered the progress of the five-year review cycles for the Tasmanian and Victorian RFAs. The committee also sought clarification on the estimated cost to industry of implementing regulations on illegal logging.¹⁹

Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA)

2.26 The committee asked APVMA officials to provide an explanation of the decision-making process regarding the granting of emergency permits for ovine strain-specific footrot vaccines.²⁰

17 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, p. 132.

18 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 133-137.

19 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 137-139.

20 *Proof Hansard*, 23 February 2015, pp 140-141.

