

I would like to make an opening statement covering the white spot outbreak and suspension of imports of uncooked prawns. It is important to clarify at the outset that we are dealing with two separate issues: the decision to suspend imports of uncooked prawns and the outbreak of white spot virus in prawn farms in the Logan River area.

A full investigation into the cause of the outbreak is underway and I stress that we do not know the cause of that outbreak. There are five potential pathways being investigated with results of tests pending and Mr Chapman will talk more about that soon but we may never know the cause of the outbreak.

It is also important to reiterate that white spot disease has no human health implications.

The decision to suspend prawn imports was informed by evidence of use of prawns for human consumption as bait and high incidences of white spot disease in retail prawns intended for human consumption in the Logan River area. The department was also investigating potential systematic circumvention of our import requirements by a number of importers.

The regulation of imports of prawn products into Australia has been evolving for twenty-five years. Australia takes a risk-based approach to biosecurity—that is, providing a high level of protection aimed at reducing risk to a very low (but not zero) level.

Import conditions have been progressively implemented from 1992, prior to then there were no import controls on prawns. Mr Chapman will talk to these increased controls shortly.

The Import Risk Analysis for prawns was completed in December 2009 following a transparent process involving extensive consultation and feedback running over many years, and an independent review by a group of eminent scientists, and consideration of appeals.

The department has investigated and responded to a number of incidences of non-compliance with prawn import requirements.

In 2000 there was a white spot outbreak at three aquaculture facilities in Darwin, and subsequent infection of Darwin harbour, as a result of infected feed being used. This outbreak was successfully eradicated and saw import conditions put in place.

An investigation from 2006 uncovered illegal importation of prawn feed by three prawn farmers in NSW and Queensland resulting in convictions and fines.

In 2013, the department became aware of independent testing which detected white spot disease in prawns for sale at retail outlets in Australia which then resulted in an investigation into possible washing or mislabelling of marinated prawns. As a result a number of marinated prawn consignments were rejected and re-exported and the conditions around importing marinated prawns clarified with importers.

In mid-2016, the department was investigating following information received that some importers were allegedly circumventing inspection and testing processes at the border. The department carried out a full investigation to identify and take action against these importers. The department acted to manage biosecurity risk in accordance with the best available assessment of that risk. The department continued to be guided by the import risk assessment whilst the investigation was directed at stopping suspected illegal activity and therefore stopping infected prawns entering Australia.

On 1 December 2016, testing confirmed that a prawn farm in the Logan River area was contaminated with white spot disease. The Queensland Government mobilised an emergency response, the Australian Government, through the department, continues to assist Queensland. Australian Government support to the emergency response has included staff deployment, coordination activities, provision of expert advice and financial assistance. The department and Queensland Government also undertook surveillance and investigation activities to try to identify the source of the outbreak.

Following the confirmation of white spot on farms in the Logan river area investigators collected uncooked prawns from a range of retail outlets in the vicinity for testing and checked on bait being used by recreational fishers. Two fishermen were found using uncooked prawns intended for human consumption as bait in the area. Testing of the purchased retail prawns and the prawns used as bait showed presence of white spot disease despite having passed tests at the border. The combination of these factors—the fishermen using infected prawns, retail availability of infected prawns, and the investigation into non-compliance with biosecurity requirements—that informed the decision to suspend imports. The department received advice that 14 of the 19 retail samples were positive for white spot virus on the afternoon of 4 January 2017. The

Secretary of the Department, who is also the Director of Biosecurity, formed the view that trade should be suspended. The Deputy Prime Minister was briefed on the afternoon of 5 January. On Friday 6 January, the Director of Biosecurity formally made a determination under the powers of the *Biosecurity Act 2015* to suspend the importation of uncooked prawns.

The Queensland and Australian governments continue to work together to respond to the Logan River outbreak, and to try to determine the source. Eradication is the objective and considered feasible. The department has implemented an enhanced testing and inspection regime for prawn products that were in transit at the time the suspension came into effect. The department has also worked with retailers and wholesalers to identify and withdraw infected product from sale and to educate the community about the importance of not misusing prawn products. We continue to work with industry and the Queensland Government to support farmers affected by the outbreak, \$1.74 million in funding has been announced to assist with costs associated with the response. And the department is pursuing action against those importers who may have deliberately evaded our biosecurity rules, including revoking import permits and taking action to remove approved arrangements and have sent a brief to the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions.

Biosecurity is an ongoing challenge. The department has reviewed our actions in relation to handling of imported raw prawns and we have made changes. There will be an independent review by the Inspector General of Biosecurity and a Senate inquiry.

The Australian Government is reassessing the conditions for importation of raw prawns and will not allow imports of uncooked prawn products unless we are sure that the biosecurity risk is acceptably low. We have allowed trade to resume in some lower risk products and will work through the remaining products over the coming months. The suspension will remain in place until we can be certain that the risk can be managed.