Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2016 - 2017, 19 October 2016

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OUTCOME: 5 - Regulation, Safety and Protection

Topic: Biosecurity

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Senator: Di Natale, Richard

Question:

Please outline the department's readiness for Zika virus in Australia?
a) What are our biosecurity measures to prevent spread?
b) What advice or modelling or analysis has the department done on the likelihood of a break out?
c) What advice has been provided to the Minister on such a risk?
d) Are we prepared to provide the appropriate information and protection for Australian people and pregnant women or women of pregnancy age?

Answer:

a) Biosecurity measures to prevent spread of Zika

Zika virus is spread by the bite of a mosquito that is carrying the virus. Not all types of mosquito can spread it. Some types of *Aedes mosquito* can spread Zika virus, particularly *Aedes aegypti* but also possibly *Aedes albopictus*.

There is significant investment in surveillance of *Aedes aegypti* and *Aedes albopictus* in the areas of Queensland where the species are continually present. Surveillance for the early detection of these species is also a priority in areas of Australia such as the Northern Territory where they could possibly become established. The Torres Strait *Aedes albopictus* prevention and control program conducted by the Queensland Government in partnership with the Australian Government Department of Health aims to minimise the threat of an incursion of *Ae. albopictus* to the mainland, by elimination of the species from the main transport hubs of Thursday Island and Horn Island.

In June 2016, the Commonwealth provided Queensland nearly a million dollars ($0.97 million) to enhance surveillance efforts and boost the capacity of Dengue Action Response teams in Cairns and Townsville to reduce the possibility of Zika transmission in North Queensland.

Australia has a range of measures in place to minimise the risk of spread of Zika virus, in particular measures to control and eliminate mosquito vectors. The Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (Agriculture) manages the control of mosquito vectors on international aircraft, vessels and cargo and conducts vector surveillance for exotic

mosquitoes across all Australian international air and sea ports on behalf of the Department of Health.

Australia has established measures at all Australian first points of entry to prevent the incursion and establishment of exotic mosquitoes. This includes the requirement for the disinsection of all aircraft arriving in Australia, vector monitoring and control activities at the border, and mandatory treatments of high risk international cargo to mitigate the risk.

These measures are undertaken to prevent the exotic mosquitoes establishing breeding populations in Australia, thereby preventing the potential for local spread of exotic diseases such as Zika virus and dengue from an infected traveller.

The Department implements a number of public awareness campaigns to help reduce the spread of mosquito-borne diseases and currently has banners and electronic signage at airports focused on Zika protective measures, including mosquito bite avoidance and safe sex, and the symptoms of Zika virus infection. There is also a prominent presence on the Department's website focussed on Zika virus infection.

On 7 February 2016, the Australian Government announced a $500,000 contribution to the World Health Organization (WHO) Zika Virus Action Plan for the Pacific, to ensure a coordinated response across our region. The Australian aid program supports WHO and the Pacific Community to strengthen regional disease surveillance and response. Australia's bilateral assistance also supports activities to address mosquito-borne diseases in Pacific countries, including malaria and dengue. These efforts can contribute to reducing the risk of Zika virus transmission.

b) Departmental analysis on outbreak risks

As Australia does not have established populations of the type of mosquitoes that can carry the virus (with the exception of parts of Queensland), the risk of an outbreak of Zika virus in Australia is extremely low. The Department has monitored the international situation closely since November 2015 and is working with the World Health Organization (WHO) so that the risks to Australia are understood and can be managed.

Ongoing risk assessment and analysis activities include:

- The risks of acquiring Zika virus in specific countries and areas are assessed on a weekly basis, and this risk assessment forms the basis of the Department's list of Zika affected countries, refer to http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-zika-countries.htm;
- Since December 2015, the Office of Health Protection (OHP) has maintained an iterative risk assessment of the implications of Zika virus spread worldwide, including for prevention and control measures in Australia;
- Supporting departmental monitoring and analysis, the Communicable Disease Network Australia (CDNA) Zika Working Group, comprising of public health and clinical experts, develops relevant advice for clinicians, laboratories and the public on managing risks of Zika infection and spread; and
- The National Arbovirus and Malaria Advisory Committee (a subcommittee of CDNA) has regularly provided advice on potential vectors and research.

c) Advice provided to the Minister

The Department briefs the Health Minister weekly through Whole-of-Government Talking Points, Question Time Briefs, and Situation reports. Australia's Chief Medical Officer also briefed government agencies on all aspects of Zika virus on 2 February 2016, 16 February 2016, 11 March 2016, 6 April 2016, 1 June 2016, 5 July 2016, and 6 September 2016.

d) Are we prepared to provide the appropriate information and protection for Australian people and pregnant women or women of pregnancy age

Yes. On 18 February 2016, the Department published:

- guidelines for management of pregnant women with Zika virus exposure;
- recommendations for reducing the risk of sexual transmission of Zika virus; and
- information about Zika testing.

These guidelines were updated on 8 July and 22 August 2016 subsequently after the WHO and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published their respective guidelines.

On 6 September 2016, the WHO updated guidance on 'prevention of sexual transmission of Zika virus'. This latest update recommends that all people (including asymptomatic males and females) returning from areas where Zika virus is known to occur should adopt safer sex practices, or consider abstinence for at least six months (increased from 8 weeks).

- On 30 September 2016, the CDC updated its guidance to reflect the new WHO advice for symptomatic and asymptomatic males, but for females to still practice safe sex for eight weeks.
- The Department is considering this advice and the need to amend existing guidelines for preventing sexual transmission of Zika virus.

States and Territories also update and maintain fact sheets and guidelines for the public and health professionals on their websites.

On 4 October 2016, National Guidelines for Public Health Units (PHU) on Zika were published on the Department's website. The purpose of these guidelines is to provide nationally consistent guidance to PHUs in responding to Zika.

Australian public health laboratories are able to diagnose Zika virus infection if required.

The Department is working closely with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide advice through the Smartraveller website and social media accounts which recommends that all travellers to affected areas should take measures to prevent mosquito bites.