Economics Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Industry, Innovation and Science Portfolio
2016-17 Supplementary Budget Estimates
20 October 2016

AGENCY: CSIRO

TOPIC: Biosecurity Breach at Black Mountain

REFERENCE: Written Question – Senator Carr

QUESTION No.: SI-86

In reference to the press release dated 5 September 2016, "Investigation into Black Mountain lab protocols":

1) Has the CSIRO investigation concluded? If so, what conclusions have been reached?
2) The press release says you "have notified Biosecurity Australia of the incident and sought advice on what reporting might be required". Given this, what reporting is required?
3) How many staff were potentially affected?
4) What support has been provided to staff?
5) What steps have been taken to minimise risk to the public?
6) What steps have been taken to minimise similar events at Black Mountain and other possible CSIRO sites?

ANSWER

1) The CSIRO internal investigation of this incident has now been concluded. As a result of the investigation six recommendations have been made which have all been accepted and are currently being implemented. The recommendations are:

   1. That CSIRO dedicate appropriate personnel and resources to the development and implementation of a comprehensive, consistent organisation-wide biosecurity compliance program, having regard to relevant legislative and regulatory regimes and industry standards, such compliance program to encompass, amongst other things, staff training and education, proactive facilities management, robust import and quarantine protocols and meaningful enforcement procedures and measures.

   2. That CSIRO introduce a requirement for site based chemical or biological safety officers (similar to current requirements for radiation safety officers). Such site based safety officers can provide expert advice and direction for enhancing safety behaviour around chemical and biological safety and become a “go to” person for dealing with areas where other staff are less knowledgeable.

   3. That staff and line managers associated with laboratories handling quarantine materials are required to undertake the on line training provided by Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (DAWR) regardless of the risk status of microorganisms currently worked on or being imported.

   4. That CSIRO upgrade procedures for approval of visitors and where necessary, commence the induction process before the visitor comes to Australia. This upgrade would include documentation that can be sent to international collaborators explaining the importance of Australia’s quarantine and border protection legislation, the correct process for sending

microorganisms and other biological material to CSIRO laboratories and the consequences of non-compliance (including fines and imprisonment).

5. As there remains a risk that microorganisms and other biologicals may be brought into Australia inappropriately, regardless of instructions provided, that CSIRO staff who obtain biological material from overseas should be more comprehensively trained and have access to procedures to be undertaken, if such an inappropriate importation event does occur (ie, correct reporting, destruction of materials, documentation of the incident, etc.).

6. That CSIRO provide training and adopt a common understanding of procedures in PC2 laboratories including appropriate use of laminar flow and bio safety cabinets and similar equipment.

2) The *Biosecurity Act 2015 (Cth)* requires that any reportable biosecurity incidents (as defined under Section 6 of the *Biosecurity (Reportable Incidents) Determination 2016*) be reported to a biosecurity officer or the Director of Biosecurity. As a consequence, on 1 September 2016 CSIRO notified the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources (DAWR) of the incident via its hotline and via email the same day. On 6 September 2016 the DAWR Biosecurity Audit Section advised CSIRO by telephone that CSIRO had provided sufficient notification from a reporting perspective.

3) 33 staff and 15 contractors who work in the building where the laboratory in question is located attended work during the potential exposure period and could have entered the laboratory during this time.

4) On 1 September 2016 all potentially affected laboratory staff were invited to attend a meeting at which information known at that time in relation to the incident was presented.

On 2 September 2016 the Black Mountain Site Leader informed all Black Mountain staff by email of the incident.

CSIRO engaged Professor Peter Collignon, a microbiologist and infectious disease physician, to provide advice on health risks from the possible exposure. Professor Collignon held a Q&A session with potentially affected staff on 5 September 2016. CSIRO retained Professor Collignon to provide staff one-on-one consultations on request. A further group of contractors (cleaning and maintenance staff) were identified as potentially exposed and a second Q&A was conducted by Professor Collignon on 15 September 2016 for this group.

Q&A was also posted on the CSIRO intranet site accessible by all staff and all staff were reminded of the counselling services available through CSIRO's employee assistance program.

5) There was no risk to the public as the potential release of the micro-organism was contained within a laboratory with a level 2 physical containment rating. The only people potentially at risk of exposure to the micro-organism were those occupying the laboratory space for times during the period 23-30 August 2016. The micro-organism is a common soil bacterium and incidences of infection are very low and CSIRO has been advised that there is no known incidence of human-to-human transmission of this micro-organism.

6) CSIRO Land and Water conducted an immediate audit of all organisms in use in its PC2 laboratories in Building 179 on the Black Mountain site where the incident occurred, and confirmed that there were import permits in place for all organisms. CSIRO subsequently conducted a walkthrough of the laboratory around the same time to ensure safe practices were being employed and that all organisms had been captured in the audit. The broader

recommendations (refer answer to Q1) have been accepted by Senior Management and are currently being implemented. All CSIRO Business Unit Leaders with responsibility for PC2 laboratories at CSIRO have been asked to complete audits of organisms in use.