

Chapter 1

Introduction and background to the inquiry

Introduction

1.1 On 20 October 2009 the government announced that Australia was adjusting its imported food policy settings regarding bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) for beef and beef products. The changes follow a review of current settings, including an update of the science of BSE and consideration of the risks associated with importing beef and beef products undertaken by Professor John Mathews. The new policy came into effect on 1 March 2010.

Terms of reference

1.2 On 27 October 2009 the Senate referred the following matters to the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry and report by 30 November 2009:

The possible impacts and consequences for public health, trade and agriculture of the Government's decision to relax import restrictions on beef, especially relating to the import of beef from countries previously affected by bovine spongiform encephalopathy, otherwise known as mad cow disease.

1.3 The committee subsequently resolved to extend the reporting date on a number of occasions to allow for a more detailed examination of the issues.

Conduct of the inquiry

1.4 The inquiry was advertised in *The Australian* newspaper and on the Internet. The Committee also invited submissions from Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and interested organisations and individuals.

1.5 The committee received 35 submissions (see Appendix 1). A number of individuals and organisations also provided additional information and correspondence that was authorised for publication. A list of these documents is also at Appendix 1.

1.6 The committee held public hearings in Canberra on 14 December 2009, 5 February 2010, 22 February 2010, and 25 February 2010. Witnesses who gave evidence at the hearings are listed in Appendix 2.

1.7 On 8 March 2010 the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, the Hon. Tony Burke MP, announced that he had written to the Director of Quarantine requesting Biosecurity Australia do an Import Risk Analysis (IRA) for fresh beef (chilled or frozen) from countries other than New Zealand. The committee resolved to table an interim report on 18 March 2010. This interim report will detail the

committee's deliberations to date. The committee also resolved to hold a further public hearing before tabling a final report at a date to be fixed.

The report

1.8 Chapter 2 of the report outlines Australia's food safety policy in relation to BSE and the legislative and administrative framework under which the original ban on beef imports from countries reporting any BSE cases (and those countries exposed to high risk factors) was implemented. Chapter 3 considers the process through which the revised policy was developed and the procedures through which the policy will be implemented. Chapter 4 of the report sets out the committee's conclusions and recommendations in relation to this inquiry.

Acknowledgements

1.9 The committee appreciates the time and effort of all those who provided both written and oral submissions to the inquiry. Their work has assisted the committee considerably in its inquiry.

A note on references

1.10 References in this report are to individual submissions as received by the committee, not to a bound volume. References to the committee Hansard are to the proof Hansard: page numbers may vary between the proof and the official Hansard transcript.