

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 On 27 October 2009 the Senate referred the following matter 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.

1.2 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

1.3 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.

1.4 The committee received 36 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.

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

The committee's first report

1.6 The committee tabled its first report on 18 March 2010. The first report considered 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 was implemented. The report also considered the process through which the revised policy was developed and the procedures through which the policy will be implemented and set out the committee's conclusions and recommendations at that point.

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 to carry out an Import Risk Analysis for fresh beef (chilled or frozen) from countries other than New Zealand. The Minister stated that

the previously announced policy would remain in place, but that the assessment of the risk of imports under the policy will now have a higher level of formality.

1.8 The committee welcomed the Minister's announcement. However, the committee announced its intention to examine the implications of the Minister's announcement at a further public hearing in order to gain a complete understanding of how the import policy will now be implemented, and the extent to which this implementation process will be subject to appropriate ministerial scrutiny.

The committee's final report

1.9 In its final report, the committee further considers the risk assessment processes that will be undertaken by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) and Biosecurity Australia (BA). The committee also notes developments in relation to the review of food labelling law and policy in relation to unpackaged meat, particularly beef.

Acknowledgement

1.10 The committee thanks those individuals and organisations who made submissions and gave evidence at public and *in camera* hearings.