



**Australian
BORDER FORCE**

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Opening Statement**

**ABF Senate Estimates Hearing
2/3/2020**

Senators,

I would like to take this opportunity to provide an overview of the ABF's current priorities, challenges and operating environment.

Since I last presented evidence to the Committee, the Australian Border Force (ABF) has continued its evolution as a contemporary border management agency and recent events have shown that the ABF today is greater than the sum of the parts that were integrated in 2015.

In this reporting period we have delivered strong operational outcomes, managed increasing volumes of trade and travel and worked within our budget, throughout what has been a complex and high tempo period that has seen the ABF play a leading role in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and a small supporting role in response to the catastrophic bushfire season. In doing so, we have prioritised effort on the basis of risks and threats and have demonstrated considerable adaptability. This has been enabled in large part due to effective and on-going collaboration with partner agencies and stakeholders.

COVID-19

The ABF has been at the forefront of Australia's response to the outbreak of COVID-19, which has been led by public health authorities including the Commonwealth's Chief Medical Officer.

We have worked hand in hand with the Departments of Health; Agriculture; Education, Skills and Employment; Foreign Affairs and Trade; Defence; and Industry – to coordinate a holistic approach to the health emergency. Specifically, the ABF has been focussing on traveller movements at borders and ports, as well as supporting the repatriation of Australian citizens, permanent residents and some foreign nationals evacuated from Hubei province – and facilitating their subsequent quarantine arrangements.

The ABF was able to commence the enforcement of the enhanced border control measures within a very short space of time and airlines were advised of the initial announcement, on 1 February, within a couple of hours of the Government's decision. Formal written advice to airlines followed the same evening.

I accept that some people's travel plans were disrupted and some people were significantly inconvenienced. This was a necessary part of what was a difficult and unprecedented situation.

In subsequent weeks, we have continued to successfully enforce these measures; minimising the impact on travellers where possible through regular and thorough engagement including with airlines, ports, maritime authorities and the cruise ship industry.

Modern, well equipped quarantine facilities were established rapidly at Christmas Island and a little later at Howard Springs near Darwin, to enable the safe return of Australians, permanent residents and their families from Hubei Province to Australia. All of those people have now returned home and resumed their lives; I note that many have expressed their appreciation for the whole of Government's effort, including Qantas, to ensure they could safely return home.

A further 170 people who were on the Diamond Princess cruise ship were also evacuated to the Howard Springs facility in the early hours of 20 February and are current undertaking a 14-day quarantine period.

I am very proud of the way my officers have conducted themselves, whether on the front line or the huge planning effort behind the scenes, particularly when considering how quickly we implemented new border control measures over a few hours. Throughout the operation, ABF officers have performed with the professionalism, commitment, diligence and compassion expected of them by the Australian public, and I commend their efforts.

VOLUMES AND SUPPLY CHAIN INTEGRITY

Over the past four financial years, the number of international air travellers has risen by more than 17 per cent— from 38 million to 44.7 million, while imported air cargo consignments have increased by about 52 per cent — from 34.9 million to approximately 53 million. ¹

International mail gateways received more than 119 million inbound mail articles in the 2018-19 financial year. ²

Such enduring increases in volume necessitate a range of responses that improve efficiency and optimise the impact our finite resources; our partnerships across the Home Affairs portfolio and with other intelligence and law enforcement agencies are delivering exceptional operational results, whilst our Trusted Trader program is enabling us to focus our compliance efforts in more targeted ways.

The ongoing Operation Cabestro for example, is a joint investigation involving the ABF, AFP and ATO, that started as a simple compliance activity in the ABF and is now targeting individuals and groups suspected of defrauding the Australian Government of what could be hundreds of millions of dollars, through claiming false duty drawbacks on imported alcohol.

The ABF-led, whole-of-government Illicit Tobacco Taskforce has also continued to produce exceptional results – seizing more than 182 million cigarettes and 61 tonnes of loose leaf tobacco at the border, in the 2018-19 financial year. The estimated duty evaded was more than \$213 million.³

Combatting the scourge of illicit drugs continues to be one of the ABF's highest priorities. A very recent example of the continued threat is the seizure last month of 154kg of methamphetamine that arrived in Melbourne via sea cargo from Mexico. It is only through working closely with partners, in this case the AFP and Victoria Police, that we can continue to maximise our capability to defend against such threats.

CUSTOMS AND BORDER MODERNISATION

The ABF continues to lead the Government's efforts to combat one of the most egregious forms of exploitation in the supply chain; modern slavery. A key focus of this work includes our engagement with business to ensure that supply chains in Australia are not tainted by modern slavery.

Our border and supply chains also provide the mechanisms through which we can work with industry to improve the flow of people and goods for our overall economic benefit. We are developing a customs and border modernisation agenda designed to cut red tape, improve service delivery, enhance supply chain integrity and minimise revenue leakage.

This is a complex program geared towards improving all aspects of our business while making our services more convenient, seamless and digital.

Delivering on this agenda will involve extensive partnership with industry. To this end I have established the Customs Advisory Board and held our inaugural meeting on 25 February 2020.

Whether with whole-of-Government partners, industry or internal staff and stakeholders, collaboration remains the centre of gravity of the ABF's ability to continue to prepare for and respond to multiple priorities and threats.

Thank you Chair.

END

¹ Pezzullo, M. Speech. Seven Gathering Storms. National Security in the 2020s. ASPI International Border Policy Conference. Poland. October 2019.

² Stats provided by ABF Port Operations Command team, February 2020

³ Outram, M. Opening Statement. Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearing, 21 October, 2019