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**Opening Statement**

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**SPEECH**

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Thank you Chair and committee.

When I last appeared before this committee, Australia had just begun to reopen its border to international travel under a staged process agreed by National Cabinet for a COVID safe re-opening to the rest of the world.

As with everything associated with the world's response to this once-in-a-century pandemic, reopening any international border is a dynamic and evolving endeavour, not least with the emergence of the Omicron variant late last year. By necessity, the experience of today's international traveller is significantly different compared to before the Australian border closed in March 2020.

**Reopening the Border**

Since 1 November, fully vaccinated Australian citizens and permanent residents have been able to leave Australia without requiring a travel exemption. The definition of immediate family was also expanded on 1 November, to enable fully vaccinated parents of Australian citizens and permanent residents to travel to Australia.

On 15 December, Australia reopened to fully vaccinated international students, skilled migrants, working holiday makers and refugee, humanitarian, temporary and provisional family visa holders.

In addition, international travel zones have been established with eligible travellers from Singapore, Japan and the Republic of Korea, who are able to travel without an exemption and outside arrival caps. Australia's staged border re-opening has helped to test and refine our

systems and processes before a broader re-opening, in a way that protects the health and safety of Australians.

Since 1 November, the ABF has facilitated nearly 580,000 arrivals through airports around the country. Already the daily average for international arrivals in February is almost 11,000 per day, compared to a daily average of 2,200 passengers in October 2021. By this time next week, on 21 February, Australia will reopen to all fully vaccinated visa holders, welcoming the return of tourists, business travellers, and other visitors. This is a significant milestone and the ABF is well prepared and postured to, once again, facilitate high volumes of goods and passengers across our border, while protecting the Australian community from those who seek to circumvent our border requirements.

We have a multi-layered approach to protecting the border which starts offshore. The ABF has officers in 18 overseas locations working with airlines to ensure they understand Australia's border entry requirements, as well as the Border Operations Centre in Australia, which supports airlines 24/7. The Border Operations Centre took over 85,000 calls in the last 6 months that led to airlines denying uplift to over 2,500 people, who did not meet our entry requirements.

While we hear about individual high profile cases, these do not represent the experience of the hundreds of thousands of people who have successfully crossed our border, and done the right thing to ensure they meet our entry requirements; our assurance program that checks vaccination documentation on arrival, since it was established in mid-November 2021, shows that over 99.9% of international arrivals comply with Australia's vaccination entry requirements.

So the system is working and our borders are robust. However, no international border in the world is infallible, even before COVID-19, and we continue to review and strengthen our processes to ensure we remain in an optimal position to support the next stage of reopening the border.

## **The Australian Open**

The ABF does not generally comment on specific operational matters, or individuals, however the publicity garnered in the lead up to the Australian Open requires addressing, as it generated significant debate and some confusion.

While COVID 19 has meant travelling to Australia is more complicated than it used to be, over 1.2 million passengers have successfully entered Australia since 1 July 2020 and complied with our border requirements.

Since 15 December 2021, to enter Australia without applying for an individual travel exemption, a non-citizen must hold one of the eligible visas and be fully vaccinated. A traveller who provides acceptable proof that they cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons, can access the same travel arrangements as those who are fully vaccinated. It is an individual traveller's responsibility to ensure they meet all border entry requirements regardless of who they are or the reason for their travel to Australia.

Having a previous COVID-19 infection is not, nor has it ever been considered, an allowable reason for a medical exemption from COVID-19 vaccination for travel to Australia and Minister Hunt, and the Department of Health, both clearly advised Tennis Australia of this in November 2021.

Vaccination status is confirmed at check in by the airline. Before arrival in Australia, individuals also provide details of their vaccination status through the Australia Travel Declaration (ATD), which is used to refer them to the relevant state and territory officials upon arrival. As I mentioned earlier, our assurance processes show that 99.9% of passengers have the required evidence of their vaccination status.

Visa cancellation delegates exercising powers under the *Migration Act 1958* undertake a comprehensive training program, covering relevant legislation and the cancellation process relevant to incoming passengers. This is regularly reviewed to maintain consistency and fairness, and to ensure matters of case law are appropriately addressed in training.

When a non-citizen's visa is cancelled, they are entitled to challenge the decision through the courts or, where available, merits review in the Administrative Appeal Tribunal. If and when errors are identified through a merits review or court decision, training and procedures are reviewed and adapted as necessary.

### **International trade supporting Australia's COVID-19 response**

The ABF has also continued to enable cross-border trade, to support Australia's economic recovery and, since March 2020, has facilitated the arrival of over 27 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines and 36,000 doses of COVID-19 treatments.

The ABF is supporting the Therapeutic Goods Administration, to protect the community from unscrupulous suppliers. Since 30 March 2020, ABF referrals to the TGA have led to the seizure of 12,900 unauthorised COVID-19 test kits, as well as unapproved medicines and substandard protective equipment, including the seizure of over 721,000 units of ivermectin 186,000 units of hydroxychloroquine and 51,000 facemasks.

### **Conclusion**

As Australia's frontline border law enforcement agency, the ABF will continue to adapt and learn as we support Australia's ongoing pandemic response and, post COVID, our economic recovery. Our dedicated officers will remain vigilant in protecting the Australian community and its interests at our international border.

Thank you.