

**MICHAEL OUTRAM APM
COMMISSIONER
AUSTRALIAN BORDER FORCE
Senate Estimates**

Senators,

Since I last provided evidence to this committee, the ABF has remained at the forefront of Australia's response to the global pandemic through our work at the international border. COVID-19 continues to impact our core services and operations under the Customs Act, Migration Act and Maritime Powers Act:

- We continue to play a key role in supporting trade and have re-focused our resources to facilitate the movement of essential goods across the border, whilst ensuring that the integrity of our supply chains is maintained.
- We have established an exemption regime to enable some visa holders to enter Australia and to enable some Australians to depart while travel bans remain in place.
- We have worked hard to keep the virus out of our detention facilities and we continue to undertake the return of unlawful non-citizens to their home country when we can, whilst managing an increasing number of people in detention due to international travel restrictions.
- We have continued undertake aerial surveillance and to put our officers and ships out to sea to maintain effective civil maritime security, whilst managing the logistical impacts of individual state and territory health and border measures.
- Most recently, we have worked closely with Commonwealth, State and industry partners to operationalise a Safe Travel Zone from New Zealand to Australia. This is an important, initial step, to reopening our international borders.

Managing the consequences of COVID-19 continues to demand unprecedented levels of agility within the ABF and collaboration with both public and private sector partners here in Australia and overseas. I'm very proud of the way our officers have responded.

Throughout the global pandemic we have remained true to our mission to protect Australia's international border, while facilitating travel and trade. Achieving this has sometimes required us to deliver the desired operational effect in novel ways.

As we look forward, through and beyond the global pandemic, the ABF will remain focused on how we can assist industry and Australia's economic recovery wherever possible, whilst upholding the integrity of our international border and facilitating the safe international travel of Australians and visitors to Australia.

It's a little over five years since the ABF was established. We've learned and changed a lot in that time and I believe our response to COVID-19 demonstrates that we have become greater than the sum of the parts that were integrated in 2015. 2020 has, in many ways, accelerated our growth. It is clear that as we look forward, we will be under increasing pressure to respond rapidly to many new challenges, be they directly or indirectly related to COVID-19.

To keep up to speed with what's happening globally and where possible to build consensus, during COVID-19 we have worked hard to maintain and build our ties with our international partners and standard setting bodies. This has occurred bi-laterally and multilaterally through regular virtual meetings, including with the World Customs Organisation, ASEAN Heads of Customs, Border 5 Heads, Heads of Asian Coast Guards, and the Oceania Customs Organisation. This year, with the Chief of the Defence Force and Commissioner of the AFP, I will once again co-host the Joint Heads of Pacific Security (virtual) meeting with regional counterparts.

Operational and service delivery over the next few years will require a step shift in the way the ABF operates. Facilitating the movement of people and goods globally will be a very different proposition than it would have been without COVID-19. Different countries may adopt different standards and processes at various times, tailored to the nuances of their own domestic situation, which has the potential to create sporadic fragmentation within the system that connects international borders.

To prepare for this future and for the ABF to support industry, our workforce and partners, we will be required to enhance the depth and frequency of our engagement around the country. This will also help to drive the modernisation of our border, which in turn will help to speed up trade and travel in a post COVID-19 world.

The ABF is therefore implementing a new operating model. As a first step we are expanding our Customs Group and creating two distinct but complimentary functions; one focussing on our regulatory role and the other on engagement with industry, border systems and the trade simplification agenda. We are also augmenting our presence around the country through relocating four of our seven Assistant Commissioners to Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth; to drive operational and service delivery, to

engage more closely with our front line, with industry and with other stakeholders, including our law enforcement counterparts.

Australia's international borders have not closed and the ABF has adapted to changes in circumstances to keep trade flowing and, albeit in very limited numbers, to allow for the movement of international travellers.

Large volumes of air and sea cargo continues to arrive into Australia. Despite disruptions caused by COVID-19 the overall number of air cargo consignments have increased substantially during the past year. In 2019-20 we processed 57.8 million air cargo consignments, up from 53 million in 2018-19. And wharf activity remains strong, with redirected e-commerce resulting in a 32 per cent increase in the number of consignments arriving by sea during the past financial year.

COVID-19 unfortunately hasn't eradicated some of the nefarious activities that occur at the border and we have continued to detect and seize large quantities of illicit drugs, tobacco and other prohibited items amongst the flows of international mail and cargo coming to Australia. In recent weeks, with our partners, we detected and disrupted one of the largest recorded illicit drug importations by sea, just off the NSW coast.

The integrity of our international border and supply chain is of paramount importance to our national economy and well-being. Working to enhance supply chain integrity is a key priority, as is our work to support economic recovery. These two goals are related and complimentary and the ABF is leading across several government measures to simplify the trade system and create more seamless trade facilitation. This work includes progressing the development of a Trade Single Window to reduce duplication and red tape for traders, and to increase our overall level of competitiveness in global supply chains.

As Government makes decisions about international travellers and our international border settings, the ABF is well positioned to respond and we will work with port operators, airlines, cruise operators and other industry and government partners to do our part to help boost economic recovery.

Thank You.