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COMMISSIONER AND COMPTROLLER-GENERAL OF CUSTOMS
AUSTRALIAN BORDER FORCE
Opening statement at Budget Estimates
28 October 2022

Approx. 6.2 min speech

Thank you chair and committee.

Border as a strategic national asset

International borders are interconnected systems that empower states with the control to manage their territorial sovereignty, national security and economic prosperity.

The way our border has been managed has allowed the ‘tyranny of distance’ to be replaced by the ‘prospects of proximity.’

Australia’s future prosperity and wellbeing will be underpinned by harnessing the full benefits that a modern, secure and seamless border can bring.

The ABF occupies a unique strategic position as an integrated border agency with customs, maritime and immigration enforcement and facilitation functions.

Today, the cumulative growth in international trade and travel, evolving border security challenges, a high attrition rate and the requirement to absorb increases in the cost of doing business, have resulted in a tight fiscal environment for the ABF.

Critical decisions as to where our officers are assigned is and will continue to require us to make difficult trade-offs between risk tolerance, service delivery in our ports, quality and cost.

However, these steps will only address short-term issues. Over the next 10 to 20 years, the ABF and Australia’s border must significantly modernise.

Adaptability, flexibility and openness to change are essential characteristics for a border agency seeking to effectively respond to the changing context of border threats, travel and trade.

Trade modernisation work

Trade modernisation through enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of our trade system is a key priority for the ABF.

The ABF is continuing to implement and develop a number of trade modernisation initiatives in consultation with industry stakeholders to support Australia's economic recovery and help to ensure the national resilience of our borders.

Trade

We continue to improve effectiveness in detecting and preventing illicit drugs from reaching Australians through cargo shipments, which is proven by our increased detection rates.

Compared to the previous financial year, sea cargo inspections led to a 47 per cent rise in positive detections for 2021-22. The number of illicit drugs detected in all trade domains continues to increase year on year.

Nationally across all air and sea cargo and international mail domains, methamphetamine detection trends in 2022 indicate a considerable increase in both the number of detections and weights, with the half-year aggregate weights on course to exceed the full-year weight totals of each of the previous three years.

There was an 81 per cent increase in the number of methamphetamine detections in Australian between 2020-21 and 2021-22.

Despite such successes, criminals are adept at exploiting and creating gaps in our border defences to smuggle harmful contraband into our country, including digital contraband.

As we aim to create a border that enables, rather than constrains economic activity, we must become expeditious in dealing with the sophisticated manner in which criminals exploit our weaknesses and cause significant harm to Australians and businesses for their own illegitimate gain.

Operation JARDENA

Through Operation Jardena, the ABF has enhanced its presence at the border in order to make things a lot harder for organised criminals and their 'trusted insider' partners.

Since I last appeared before committee the ABF has extended this work and led the way in building an international coalition of border agencies with key overseas jurisdictions, multi-lateral organisations such as the World Customs Organisation and global cargo shipping lines.

Our ability to work ahead of the border will also increase significantly in the coming months, with the Budget released earlier this week including additional funding for the ABF to establish a network of officers across the Pacific.

Revenue Protection

A key part of our role is providing a customs service that maximises and protects Australia's revenue. ABF has a dedicated focus on trade enforcement to deter and prevent the leakage of Commonwealth revenue.

ABF continues to build on our trade enforcement capability in the disruption of transnational, serious and organised crime activities such as trade based money laundering, more effective identification of prohibited and restricted goods, and the ability to manage border transactions with a focus on trade enforcement.

Further, ABF is leading several World Customs Organisation trade enforcement operations demonstrating our commitment to working ahead, at, and after the border to protect Australia's revenue and ensure compliance with border laws.

Conclusion

Now more than ever we need to invest in our border as a strategic and economic asset to enhance international trade and to attract more international travellers. Hardening the border against criminals, the smuggling of harmful goods and revenue evasion are key foundations for seamless trade and travel.

Today, our officers confront a wide array of challenges in managing the border and planning for the future. Without dedicated and professional ABF staff, these challenges would appear insurmountable and the outcomes we have delivered would not be possible.

I am increasingly proud of our people, their resilience and dedication, and our demonstrated achievements in protecting Australia's sovereign interests at the border.

CLEARANCE

Lead Business Areas
Multiple.

International Division clearance	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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Other Government agency clearance	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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Final SES Clearance (minimum SES Band 1)		
Vanessa Holben	Group Manager, Customs	25 October 2022
Kylie Rendina	A/g Deputy Commissioner North, West and Detention	24 October 2022
Kimberlee Stamatis	Assistant Secretary, Customs and Trade	19 October 2022
Jack McGrath	a/g Commander Operation JARDENA	19 October 2022
Tim Fitzgerald	AC North & Detention	19 October 2022
Erin Dale	AC East	19 October 2022
Malcolm Skene	Group Manager, Industry and Border Systems	19 October 2022

Media and Communications Branch		
Dean Benson	Director, ABF Media and Communication	20 October 2022

Minister's Office		
Xxx	Xxx	Xxx