

**MICHAEL OUTRAM APM
COMMISSIONER, AUSTRALIAN BORDER FORCE
Budget Estimates
Opening Statement
Tuesday 23 May 2023**

Thank you Chair and Committee.

The ABF has a unique role within the Commonwealth, with the stewardship of one of the nation's most significant national assets – the 'Australian border'.

How the border is managed is not only critical for our national security and resilience to unexpected global events – but for Australia's economic security and competitiveness; our way of life.

One of the key challenges for the ABF, and for me as Commissioner, is to better articulate the importance of the border as a strategic national asset and to re-frame policy thinking to account for this. If we learned anything from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the significance of the border in our ability to respond to concurrent crises.

If considered as a system, rather than a line on a map or an entry/exit point, our border can be calibrated to achieve national goals – to drive economic activity, build resilience and strategically manage security risks.

With the right vision and investment, our border can be – and will be – one of Australia's greatest national assets.

In my last opening statement, I advised the Committee of a structural realignment within the ABF and the appointment of three new Deputy Commissioners. This new structure and leadership team was put in place with an eye to getting the ABF future ready, as well as to better drive the way we manage our core business and deliver on the Government's priorities.

ABF support to Operation Sovereign Borders remains a key priority and this year will also require a dedicated focus on a number of key Government priorities, including

working with Commonwealth partners on new controls on vaping products and maintaining our hard line stance on illicit tobacco.

As part of the Government's reform of Australia's migration system we will increase our focus on migration exploitation, including cracking down on those employers that exploit migrant workers for their own benefit.

We will contribute to Australia's economic competitiveness through ongoing modernisation of our trade and travel systems. As the Commonwealth's second biggest revenue collector the ABF collected \$17.6 billion in border revenue last financial year.

However, from 2010 to 2020 Australia's trading across border ranking has slipped from 25th in the world to 106th.

If Australia's trade system stands still, then we are going backwards.

Through measures announced in the Budget we will continue work on modernising our border including key whole-of-government regulatory, digital and data reforms under the Government's Simplified Trade System agenda.

We will also commence the next phase of preparing for Australia's next generation of international airports, trialling concepts for new passenger terminal and cargo examination facilities. This work will help to ensure that Western Sydney International becomes a world leading airport and that all of our International Airports are supported in modernising travel across our border.

We also remain focused on the here and now.

The movement of people and goods across borders continues to bounce back to and exceed pre-pandemic levels. More than 12 million air and sea travellers have arrived into Australia this financial year along with almost 62 million air cargo and 3.6 million sea cargo consignments.

More movement, regrettably, brings more threats.

Detections of illegal drugs and precursors at Australia's border increased by 18.1 percent Between 1 July 2022 and 28 February 2023, compared with the same period last year.

In particular, cocaine shipments are being seized at the nation's borders at unprecedented levels.

Through better targeting and intelligence we are detecting more than ever, but we know through the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission's (ACIC) wastewater analysis reporting that of the border controlled drugs that reach our borders we are only detecting up to 20 to 25%.

To better address the issue at the source the ABF is focused on hardening Australia's international supply chain from criminal infiltration.

I have previously advised the Committee of our domestic work in this space under Operation Jardena, however we have recently also taken this fight offshore.

In November and December last year, 53 countries of the World Customs Organization, led by the ABF and supported by major shipping lines, launched a global operation known as Operation Tin Can which over a six week period seized nearly 100 tonnes of cocaine, resulting in 43 arrests. With our likeminded partners the ABF will build on this unprecedented operation to make Australia's supply chains increasingly hostile to organised criminal groups.

Working ahead of the border to prevent threats from ever reaching Australia's shores has long been a key strategy for the ABF. The funding received through the Budget to maintain our Airline Liaison Officer program is a key pillar to that strategy and will ensure we can maintain a strong presence at major transit ports across the globe where year to date our ALOs have already prevented the movement of over 600 illegitimate travellers saving the taxpayer in excess of \$47 million in onshore processing, detention and removal costs.

Chair, I wish to conclude by paying special recognition to the dedicated officers of the Australian Border Force. In particular, earlier this month ABF officers along with officers from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Australian Defence Force conducted two successful evacuation flights from Sudan removing 153 people, including 57 Australians and Australian visa holders, from harms way.

This is not the first time ABF officers have been required to travel into conflict zones in order to assist their fellow Australians. They go about their work professionally and quietly, and while this type of service is not well known to many in our community I want to give those officers, and all the officers that supported them, that public recognition today.

I thank the Committee for its time and welcome any questions.