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**Opening Statement
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SPEECH

Thank you Chair.

Since I last appeared before this Committee, Australia's international border landscape has evolved and, with the pace of vaccinations, Australia is at a different place in the pandemic. Since well before that last appearance, the Australian Border Force and our colleagues in Home Affairs had begun lifting our gaze to the re-opening of Australia's border.

The ABF is poised for international travel to recommence at scale, starting on the 1st November, while continuing to keep essential goods crossing our border.

Reopening the international border

Re-opening the border will be complex and subject to unexpected changes, as international travel systems attempt to re-connect from the fragmented picture we see today. It requires continuous engagement with airlines, airports, international partners, Commonwealth agencies and the States and Territories.

There is no standardised process for restarting international travel and reaching pre-pandemic volumes and service levels, but the National Plan provides the guiderails. Never before have we had to validate travellers' vaccination or infection status at the scale needed from now on.

International travel is more difficult. There are more approvals to obtain and rules to follow, which differ from country to country, affecting passengers, airlines, airports and of course border agencies.

While international traveller numbers have been obliterated by Covid-19, processing times have increased with added health and biosecurity requirements. It takes around 1 hour 22 minutes to process a passenger arriving on a 'red' flight, compared to 20 to 25 minutes for 'green' flights.

Wherever we can, we must adopt simplicity as a first principle and not make coming to Australia unattractive to tourists and business travellers.

Dealing with other challenges: Afghanistan, maritime security

While supporting Australia's COVID-19 response, the ABF continues its work in Australia, our surrounding maritime domain and overseas to facilitate trade, travel and protect our borders. We are proud of our officers who deployed to Kabul and Dubai in support of the whole-of-government operation to evacuate people from Afghanistan – one of the largest humanitarian airlifts in our history.

The ABF has successfully continued the ongoing work of ensuring our nation's maritime security, despite real difficulties in moving our crews across domestic borders to support operations. With our partner agencies, we use a range of surveillance and response capabilities, deploying air and maritime assets across our surrounding oceans and seas.

To this end, I am pleased that the Department of Home Affairs has extended by six years its existing contract for civil maritime surveillance services, which are critical to our mission and the nation's border security. These services help maintain our operational awareness of Australia's vast maritime domain, enabling disruption of drug smuggling ventures and illegal fishing, deterring people smuggling, and detection and removal of marine pollutants and hazards.

Our management of these services moving forward will reflect the ANAO's four recommendations in its report on the initial maritime surveillance contract, as well as the range of contract management improvements implemented since 2017. Given the complex environment in which we operate, it is understandable that our demands on these services will continue to evolve over time, as they have done since the original contract commenced in 2008. But I expect the outcomes delivered in the next 6 years will be as successful operationally as the last 6, and these services will remain a vital part of our border security arrangements.

International trade has continued throughout the pandemic

The ABF secures Australia's principal connections to the world through the movement of goods and people – a fundamental economic role. We facilitate the flow of goods that almost every Australian business, family and individual relies on.

Australians are buying goods in different ways. For many individuals and businesses, online purchases have been the most viable option during extensive lockdowns. And volumes continue to rise: in 2020-21, the ABF facilitated and processed 26.9 per cent more sea cargo consignments and 20.1 per cent more air cargo consignments than in 2019-20.

The downturn in international travel during COVID-19 has been overlaid with increased and more complex goods movements. The ABF responded by redeploying some officers from our airports to international mail and cargo screening and intervention – which we were able to do thanks to the agility of our workforce. Such agility will remain essential as we face unprecedented demands.

Pivoting these resources enabled a 48.3 per cent increase in air cargo examinations in 2020-21, resulting in a 168.9 per cent increase in detections of illicit goods, including increases in tobacco and drugs. For sea cargo, there was a 173.4 per cent increase in the number of detections. In the mail stream, the additional resources also meant more examinations, and detections increased by 50 per cent in 2020-21.

Redeploying ABF staff from mail and cargo operations back to airports – as we must do from 1 November – will inevitably see a reduction in cargo detections and increased processing times. As always with finite human resources, our operational footprint will be guided by the threat environment and our ability to balance facilitation with intelligence-informed risk assessments.

Evolving border threats

The global border environment, from a threat perspective, is characterised by increasingly sophisticated organised criminal entities who infiltrate borders and circumvent migration, visa, trade and customs laws.

In light of the AFP's Operation Ironside, viewing the Australian border as a system – where illegal movements of goods have an offshore origin and transshipment points, and where criminals seek to corrupt processes at our ports, airports and logistics nodes – reveals the scale and sophistication of the criminal threats that are manifesting at and across our border.

In 2020-21 the ABF detected over 23 tonnes of illicit drugs, 1059 consignments of illegal firearms and over \$1.9 billion worth of illicit tobacco at the border. This is an outstanding achievement by our front line officers. But we know criminal entities continue to try to exploit vulnerabilities – including legitimate businesses – to move illicit goods into the country. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) data for 2020 showed 57 per cent of significant global cocaine detections in sea cargo utilised the 'rip methodology' of concealment, with trusted insiders in the supply chain placing and retrieving consignments without the genuine importer's knowledge.

The ABF is re-prioritising its work to allow us to focus on strengthening border integrity and making Australia's supply chain more hostile to criminal infiltration. The ABF will seek to fully leverage its legislative powers and capabilities, working closely with our partner agencies in the Home Affairs portfolio, to discover, disrupt and dismantle serious criminal actors seeking to circumvent border processes.

Tackling criminal threats while still facilitating trade means we must also build the future systems and processes that will continue to meet our responsibilities as an integrated border agency.

ABF powers – a legislative framework that is fit for purpose

As an integrated border agency and close partner of the Home Affairs portfolio agencies, the ABF has many opportunities to prevent harmful goods from reaching our shores, to make our border a hostile place for criminals and cheats, and to ensure our migration system isn't used to exploit foreign workers – notwithstanding that opportunities are sometimes missed due to statutory limitations on our ability to act or that our functions are not explicitly defined.

As Australia moves into the COVID-19 recovery phase and we face up to current and emerging threats at our border, we are taking stock of the challenges facing our frontline officers. We are shifting to a different operating model that will drive rational prioritisation, empowering decision making as close to the front line as possible, and simplifying our overall approach. We must ensure the ABF is agile, responsive and capable of keeping pace. Never has this been more critical, as we look to support economic recovery and keep our community safe.

As Australia's frontline border law enforcement agency, the ABF will continue to evolve and adapt to support Australia's pandemic response and post-COVID recovery as the border re-opens.

Thank you.