



MATTHEW CANAVAN

Senator for Queensland

19 February 2024

Mr Adam Fennessy PSM
Secretary
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Dear Mr Fennessy,

I write to you on behalf of Opposition Senators, with respect to the Additional Senate Estimates hearing of the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee that was held in Canberra on 13 February 2024.

During the hearing, Senator Duniam asked you a series of questions about recent changes to senior staffing arrangements in your Department.

Unfortunately, we are concerned on a number of levels about the accuracy of your evidence. This extends to the potential omission of important and relevant information in response to those questions.

We ask that you reflect on your answers about the circumstances and processes surrounding the departures of Cindy Briscoe, Rosemary Deininger and Nicola Hinder from their positions and of Chris Locke's decision to take leave – as well as any decisions or actions that have potentially already been taken within the Department to appoint a new Deputy Secretary to replace Dr. Locke.

I remind you of the requirement that all witnesses must provide accurate information to parliamentary committees, and of the importance of correcting and clarifying evidence if required.

Accordingly, Opposition Senators would appreciate your response to this correspondence by no later than 5.00pm on Monday 26 February 2024.

Please do not hesitate to contact me by email on senator.canavan@aph.gov.au if you have any questions or wish to further discuss this matter.

Yours sincerely,

MATTHEW CANAVAN
Deputy Chair



26 February 2024

Senator the Hon Matthew Canavan
Deputy Chair
Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee
Via email: senator.canavan@aph.gov.au

Cc: Senator.Sterle@aph.gov.au; RRAT.Sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Canavan

Thank you for your correspondence of 19 February 2024 on behalf of Opposition Senators, with respect to the Additional Senate Estimates hearing of the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee that was held in Canberra on 13 February 2024.

In addition to evidence I gave to the Committee at the hearing, I am happy to provide this further information on senior staffing arrangements for the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (the department), noting that the detail of specific employment matters can raise issues of privacy and confidentiality.

As head of the organisation and the Accountable Authority, from my first day in the role I have made it a priority and will continue to make it a priority to respond to independent reviews recently undertaken of the department, including the APS Capability Review. This will best position the department to deliver for the agricultural sector and the Australian community.

Part of this is ensuring the department has the right leadership in place to address current challenges and priorities. In relation to recent senior staffing changes, I confirm that all senior executive appointments and processes that I have made since I commenced in my role have been consistent with public sector employment legislative and policy requirements, including in consultation with the Australian Public Service Commissioner.

On commencing with the department, I considered it necessary to make changes to the senior leadership group. These changes were in relation to the Chief Operating Officer and the Deputy Secretary Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Policy Group. I met with both deputy secretaries in October 2023 to discuss my intentions to make changes to the senior leadership group.

I confirm that decisions and actions in relation to these roles were made consistent with section 37 of the *Public Service Act* 1999 and the Australian Public Service Commission's supporting advice on Senior Executive Service employment. In response to these changes, both incumbents, Ms Cindy Briscoe and Ms Rosemary Deininger, advised of their preference to retire early. Ms Briscoe and Ms Deininger subsequently took a period of leave before ceasing employment with the Department in January 2024.

Separately, after a long period of vacancy, the Deputy Secretary position for the Agriculture Trade Group was advertised in November 2023. The position was not filled from this process. The position was readvertised on 22 February 2024. In accordance with section 26 of the *Australian Public Service Commissioners Directions 2022*, the APS Commissioner was a participant in the original selection process. The APS Commissioner, or his delegate, will be on the panel for the readvertised position. Ms Nicola Hinder was acting in the role of Deputy Secretary Agriculture Trade Group and commenced leave on 8 January 2024. Ms Hinder remains employed by the department and upon the completion of her leave, has the option to return to her substantive position as First Assistant Secretary Exports and Veterinary Services (SES Band 2).

Dr Chris Locke commenced leave on 5 February 2024. Dr Locke remains on leave and is expected to return in August 2024. Prior to commencing leave, Dr Locke was in the role of Deputy Secretary Biosecurity and Compliance Group (SES Band 3). Dr Locke remains employed by the department and maintains an SES Band 3 role in the department. Ms Justine Saunders commenced with the department on 26 February 2024 on secondment from the Department of Home Affairs for a period of 4 months to temporarily undertake the Deputy Secretary Biosecurity and Compliance Group role.

On a related but separate matter, there was some discussions in the Estimates hearing on working arrangements for new Deputy Secretary Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Policy Group, Mr Matt Lowe. I can confirm that these arrangements were set out in writing, and I will make the appropriate clarification through the Hansard Correction process in due course.

I am aware and respectful of my obligations to parliamentary committees and will always be responsive to requests for further information.

Consistent with the original correspondence I have provided a copy of this letter to the Chair of the Committee, Senator Glenn Sterle and the Committee secretariat.

Thank you for writing to me on these matters.

Yours sincerely,

Adam Fennessy PSM