



5 May 2020

Opening Statement: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today.

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (DAWE) continues to work closely across our governments, with business, at the Australian border and beyond to respond to the outbreak of COVID-19.

Senators, there are over 7000 Australian Public Servants in my department dedicated to working with our many partners as we seek to help grow Australian agriculture and protect Australia's unique land, water, heritage and environment. Never have they been more committed, than over the last few months, as we've responded to the impact of the summer's bushfires, coming off the back of the awful drought, and now also the risks and impacts of this human pandemic.

Senators, under the *Biosecurity Act 2015* there are clear lines of authority about animal and plant health, and human health. In accordance with section 540, in my role as Secretary of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, I am the Director of Biosecurity; while Professor Murphy, the Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer, in accordance with section 544, is the Director of Human Biosecurity.

Officers of my department are focussed on detecting items and goods which may pose a risk to our animal, plant or environmental biosecurity, by introducing diseases and pests such as African Swine Fever, or Foot and Mouth Disease.

My officers are not trained medical experts. Thus, in relation to human biosecurity activities, they work under protocols, and rely on advice, provided by Human Biosecurity Officers authorised by the Chief Medical Officer under the *Biosecurity Act*.

In relation to cruise ship and vessel clearances, information including the clearance and passenger status of the vessel is collected in the *Maritime Arrivals Reporting System* (MARS) and conveyed to my department as well as the relevant health authorities, who are authorised as human biosecurity officers.

In the case of the passengers and crew of the *Ruby Princess*, my officers acted in accordance with the relevant health protocols, and on the advice of health authorities. My officers relied entirely on the advice from health authorities.

As there have been suggestions that incomplete or inaccurate information may have been provided by the vessel, that matter is being investigated by my department, given our responsibilities under the *Biosecurity Act*.

In closing, I would like to again acknowledge the commitment and enthusiasm of staff right across my department. Some of them have literally been at the very front line in

managing this pandemic. They, along with tens of thousands of other staff across the APS, should be very proud of their ongoing efforts. I know that I certainly am.

Thank you chair.

Andrew Metcalfe AO