

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Answers to questions on notice
Agriculture, Water and the Environment Portfolio

Question No: 1
Committee: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Inquiry name: Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic
Division/Agency: Exports
Topic: Outbreak at the Cedar Meats processing facility
Hansard Page: 26-27
Hearing date: 5 May 2020
Question Date: 5 May 2020
Question Type: Spoken

Senator Rice asked:

Senator RICE: My questions are to Mr Metcalfe, about worker safety and outbreaks in agricultural facilities. In particular, I'm interested to know when the department became aware of the outbreak that has occurred at the Cedar Meats processing facility in Melbourne?

Mr Metcalfe: I'll need to take the precise time of when we became aware of the outbreak on notice. I know it was last week, but I would need to check as to when we became aware. We had, from memory, three officers present in the plant, so I suspect we were probably notified at their level quite early. It would then have been elevated through the department.

Senator RICE: So you had three officers in the plant all the time, or are they just—tell me about that.

Mr Metcalfe: No. Because of the functions that we have—it's an export meat facility, and therefore we have officers involved in the meat inspection service who are there to undertake their role—we actually had a physical presence there. But I can check and take on notice the precise timing of the awareness that we had.

Senator RICE: Can you clarify for me that you had a physical presence there as the facility became aware of the outbreak?

Mr Metcalfe: Yes, that's what I'm saying. We had officers there who had indeed been tested to make sure they were okay, and I'm advised that they are okay. So we would have had quite an early understanding, given the circumstances, but we'll check and let you know.

Senator RICE: Okay. What steps has the department taken since the outbreak broke out?

Mr Metcalfe: I will need to get more detail on this, and Ms O'Connell may be able to help me. Effectively, there are two aspects to it: the safety of our own staff and the issue in relation to the reason for the plant, which is meat production and its export. So there are two angles to it. But Ms O'Connell may be able to provide a bit more detail for me.

Ms O'Connell: In terms of safeguarding our staff, we've had a range of measures in place that are consistent with health advice on how to prevent and protect from COVID-19. Specifically, we've got a range of staff who might be on these sorts of premises. There might be meat food-safety assessors and on-premises vets. Typically, people like our on-premises vet operate separately to the main rooms. They have their own area. They have their own area in order to take a break and have a cup of tea, and it has wash facilities and all of those sorts of things.

We've given them all the necessary work, health and safety advice around handwashing, sanitisation, necessary PPE, how to care for the gear that they wear and so on. In the very early days, we gave them advice about how to protect themselves in terms of working at a third-party premise such as an abattoir.

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Senator RICE: Is any consideration being given to the safety of the food, in terms of export, because of the outbreak at the facility?

Mr Metcalfe: Again, we'll take that on notice, so that we give you the precise response, but the fact is that transmission from animal to human and human to animal has not been demonstrated to any extent. What we're talking about is the export of processed goods. This is a meat product, not a living creature. The extent to which that has implications for our notification requirements to our export partners is primarily a responsibility for the company, and the Australian government is there in the role of a regulator. But it's an important question you ask, and so I will make sure that we give you the precise response.

Answer:

When the department became aware of the outbreak at Cedar Meats

The department was advised that a staff member of Cedar Meats had tested positive for COVID-19 on 27 April 2020.

Department physical presence at Cedar Meats as facility became aware of the outbreak

The department was required to test four departmental employees in accordance with the direction provided by Victoria's Department of Health and Human Services (DHSS) as they had attended the establishment during the screening window. All have returned a negative result.

Food safety as a result of the outbreak

To date, there is no evidence to suggest that COVID-19 is transmitted by food. This position is supported by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and other international regulators including the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).

The department, and the state regulatory authority, do not intend to initiate a recall of any product produced at the establishment. The product produced at the establishment is safe and wholesome.

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Question No: 2
Committee: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Inquiry name: Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic
Division/Agency: Agricultural Policy Division
Topic: Farmers - labour shortages
Hansard Page: 27-28
Hearing date: 5 May 2020
Question Date: 5 May 2020
Question Type: Spoken

Senator Rice asked:

Senator RICE: Finally, has the department done any work on what labour shortages farmers may be facing over the coming year?

Mr Metcalfe: We certainly have done a significant amount of work, particularly in relation to requests from farm groups about the need for the availability of working holiday-makers or seasonal labour arrangements. I think that probably first surfaced in the Burdekin area of Queensland, because the citrus crop was ready for harvest—the availability of that workforce, given a range of issues such as the closure of some state borders and the ability of visa holders to remain in Australia or return home. So, certainly, our minister and the department, again, led work very cooperatively with the states and territories, with the Department of Home Affairs, the department of employment and the Department of Foreign Affairs that has resulted in the arrangements that are now in place.

Senator RICE: Have you done any quantitative analysis across various regions? Maybe you could take that on notice?

Mr Metcalfe: I'll take it on notice. I think it's limited. It's actually quite difficult to measure, and quite often we would look to the department of employment as the people who would have a more granular understanding of the labour shortages in particular areas. But I will take that on notice.

Answer:

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment has been working with industry, state agriculture departments and other Commonwealth agencies on agricultural workforce matters as travel restrictions, social distancing and self-isolation requirements have developed.

The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES) has released a report on the [*Impacts of Covid-19 on Australian agriculture, forestry and fisheries trade*](#) which included an examination of the availability of seasonal labour. The report outlined that the vegetable, irrigated fruit, nut and cotton producers are most reliant on migrant workers and would be most affected if travel restrictions remain in place over the coming year. Peak demand for labour in the vegetable and irrigated fruit sectors is summer and early autumn meaning if the pandemic is under control by spring then the impacts in these sectors should be lower than if the pandemic continues into summer.

Industry also commissioned its own data and analysis, including estimated harvest labour requirements for the remainder of 2020.

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment understands the supply of labour for the Agricultural sector in Australia is meeting the current demand. The department is continuing to monitor the situation closely in consultation with relevant Australian Government agencies, states and territory governments and industry.

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Question No: 3
Committee: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Inquiry name: Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic
Division/Agency: Office of the Chief Veterinary Officer
Topic: Source of COVID-19
Hansard Page: 33
Hearing date: 5 May 2020
Question Date: 5 May 2020
Question Type: Spoken

Senator Lambie asked:

Senator LAMBIE: I'd like to go back to Wuhan if we can, please, because I've got some questions. It seems to have massive gaps here—about 2½ or three months worth. So we're not 100 per cent sure it comes from wet markets—is that true, or are we 100 per cent sure now that COVID-19 has come out of wet markets? Yes or no?

Mr Metcalfe: I don't think that we have said this afternoon that it is definitive that COVID-19 came out of a wet market in Wuhan, but I think that that is a very strong supposition, and we can take on notice whether we've got any better advice. What we do know is that a number of recent pandemics, including SARS and, we think, COVID-19, have come from wet markets where there is that wild animal and human interaction.

Answer:

It has not been scientifically proven that COVID-19 originated in a wet market.

Scientific studies have demonstrated a link between early cases of COVID-19 and the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China. 27 of the first 41 known cases had exposure to this wet market. Scientific studies have also shown that the virus that causes COVID-19 originated in wild animals before crossing to humans.