

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Answers to questions on notice
Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management

Committee: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Inquiry name: Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Responsible Minister: Minister Littleproud

Topic: The Commonwealth's Voluntary Statements to the NSW Special Commission of Enquiry into the Ruby Princess (**Special Commission**)

Hearing Date: 18 August 2020

Question Date: 3 August 2020

Question Type: Written

Question 1:

When and how was the Minister first made aware that:

- a. An Agriculture Biosecurity Officer failed to conduct the necessary human health screening on ill passengers with suspected cases of COVID-19 onboard the Ruby Princess, which was required by the National Protocol for managing novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) risk from cruise ships and standard Departmental procedure?
- b. An Agriculture Biosecurity Officer failed to prevent passengers from disembarking the Ruby Princess, despite the ship being incorrectly granted pratique by an Australian Border Force Officer who did not have the legal authority to do so?
- c. No official from the Department of Agriculture confirmed the New South Wales Health Department's assessment of the Ruby Princess until an hour after passengers began disembarking?
- d. An Agriculture Biosecurity Officer filed a Routine Vehicle Inspection form which falsely listed the number of ill passengers onboard the Ruby Princess and the symptoms they were displaying?
- e. An Australian Border Force Officer incorrectly read a medical form and falsely reported that isolated passengers onboard the Ruby Princess had returned negative results to COVID-19 screening?
- f. As a result of these errors, ill passengers onboard the Ruby Princess with active cases of COVID-19 were allowed to disembark without entering quarantine?

Answer 1(a):

1. These matters are addressed in the Commonwealth's 16 July 2020 Voluntary Statement to the Special Commission at paragraphs 40 to 41. All statements made by the Commonwealth are available at: rubyprincessinquiry.nsw.gov.au.
2. Biosecurity officers at the Port of Sydney relied on New South Wales (NSW) Health to make a global assessment of the level of human biosecurity risk associated with cruise ships. On that basis, traveller illness checklists were not administered to each sick passenger arriving in Australia at the Port of Sydney.
3. The Minister was briefed in relation to the arrival of the *Ruby Princess* on 23 March 2020.

Answer 1(b):

1. These matters are addressed in the Commonwealth's 16 July 2020 Voluntary Statement to the Special Commission at paragraphs 51 to 52.2.
2. No Australian Border Force Officer granted pratique. Pratique was granted by a biosecurity officer. On that basis, biosecurity officers did not seek to prevent passengers from disembarking.
3. The delay in formally granting and recording pratique was due to a technical limitation in connecting to the department's systems, rather than an intention to withhold the granting of pratique or prevent disembarkation. See paragraph 52.2 of the Commonwealth's 16 July 2020 Voluntary Statement to the Special Commission.

Answer 1(c):

1. These matters are addressed in the Commonwealth's 12 June 2020 Voluntary Statement at paragraph 98 and the 16 July 2020 Voluntary Statement to the Special Commission at paragraphs 32 to 35, 41 and 43.
2. In accordance with advice from NSW Health provided on 21 February 2020, biosecurity officers at the Port of Sydney relied on NSW Health attendance on ships assessed as having higher than a "low risk" rating. See paragraph 98 of the 12 June 2020 Voluntary Statement.
3. Biosecurity officers were entitled to conclude from the non-attendance of NSW Health at a cruise ship arrival that it had assessed the vessel as low risk. See paragraphs 32 – 34 of the Commonwealth's 16 July 2020 Voluntary Statement to the Special Commission.
4. Biosecurity officers sought further written confirmation from NSW Health at 7:31 am on 19 March 2020.
5. The Minister was briefed in relation to the arrival of the *Ruby Princess* on 23 March 2020.

Answer 1(d):

1. The contents of the Routine Vessel Inspection document had no bearing on NSW Health assessing the *Ruby Princess* as "low risk".
2. The disparity present in the Routine Vessel Inspection document appears to be a categorisation error by a non-medically trained biosecurity officer.
3. This matter was not raised with the Minister.

Answer 1(e):

1. Questions regarding Australian Border Force Officers should be addressed to the Department of Home Affairs.

Answer 1(f):

1. These matters are addressed in the Commonwealth's 16 July 2020 Voluntary Statement to the Special Commission at paragraph 52.2.
2. The Minister is not aware of the basis of this question.

Question 2:

What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that this never happens again?

Answer 2:

1. The department is committed to ensuring that it adopts best practice in managing biosecurity risk, including managing the risk posed to human health from incoming passenger vessels. The Commonwealth has commenced a process seeking to address these matters as set out at in the 16 July 2020 Voluntary Statement to the Special Commission.
2. The department:
 - a. is conducting a further review of the process and policies, which will incorporate any relevant findings made by the Special Commission of Inquiry;
 - b. has developed and updated national protocols relating to the risk assessment of vessels;
 - c. has updated the Maritime Vessel Arrival Reporting System to further clarify requirements for pratique and for obtaining confirmation from human biosecurity officers for clearance; and
 - d. has conducted training for biosecurity officers on the granting of pratique, with further training to be offered to human biosecurity officers and chief human biosecurity officers.
3. In order to ensure best practice, the Minister has asked the department to review its processes for incoming passenger vessels. The Minister expects that departmental processes will be improved or remedied where necessary.
4. Biosecurity officers at the Port of Sydney relied on NSW Health to make a global assessment of the level of human biosecurity risk associated with cruise ships.

Question 3:

With regard to a summons issued by Commissioner Bret Walker to compel the attendance of a Department of Agriculture Biosecurity Officer at the *Special Commissioner Inquiry into the Ruby Princess*:

- a. When was the Minister first made aware of the summons?
- b. Was the Minister asked for his view on Departmental officers attending the Inquiry?
- c. Did the Minister discuss the summons with any of his Ministerial colleagues? If so, when?

Answer 3(a):

1. The Minister was advised on 10 July 2020.

Answer 3(b):

1. The department did not seek the Minister's views as to whether the biosecurity officer should attend the Inquiry.

Answer 3(c):

1. The Minister did not discuss the summons of the department's biosecurity officer with his Ministerial colleagues.