

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

Committee: Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Inquiry name: Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic
Division/Agency: Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment
Hearing Date: 5 May 2020
Question Date: 8 May 2020
Question Type: Written

Senator Rice asked:

1. Has the Department or any of its agencies undertaken any work in relation to issuing food safety notices related to COVID-19? When would those food safety notices be issued? Under what circumstances?
2. Has the Department undertaken any work on providing personal protective equipment to staff in food processing facilities?
3. Has the Department undertaken any work, or provided any advice to farmers, in relation to social distancing on farms, and ensuring appropriate protections for workers?
4. What analysis has the Department undertaken in relation to ensuring appropriate accommodation for workers in the agricultural sector? Have any guidelines been prepared?
5. What engagement has the department had with the Victorian government initiative, designed to help unemployed people who want to find work in the farming sector? [Vic \$50m Agriculture Workforce Plan]
6. What input has the Department had into the National Coordinating Mechanism and its supermarkets taskforce? What official from the Department is represented at the taskforce?

Answer:

1. Has the Department or any of its agencies undertaken any work in relation to issuing food safety notices related to COVID-19? When would food safety notices be issued? Under what circumstances?

Neither the department nor its agencies have issued food safety notices related to COVID-19. Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), as the statutory agency under the Health portfolio responsible for developing and administering the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, has issued advice to food businesses that there is no evidence of COVID-19 transmission through food. The Department has referred stakeholders to this advice. Further questions in relation to food safety should be directed to the Department of Health or FSANZ.

2. Has the Department undertaken any work on providing personal protective equipment to staff in food processing facilities?

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment provides personal protective equipment to its employees located at export meat processing establishments. Based on advice from the Department of Health, additional personal protective equipment as a control for COVID-19 has not been provided.

3. Has the Department undertaken any work, or provided any advice to farmers, in relation to social distancing on farms, and ensuring appropriate protections for workers?

The Department of Health, working with its state and territory counterparts, is the lead Australian Government agency for managing public health matters in the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia. The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment does not provide advice on such matters but has been in regular contact with industry to ensure health directions are followed to provide protections to workers.

The department has been working with other Commonwealth agencies, state and territory agriculture departments and industry to support the supply of agricultural labour during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this role the department has facilitated sharing of advice on social distancing between jurisdictions and industry, including guidance from Worksafe Australia.

State and territory governments are responsible for implementing, enforcing and monitoring the health and safety requirements to minimise the spread of COVID-19. States and territories each have their own requirements.

The National Farmers' Federation (NFF) has developed guidance to help farmers to implement appropriate work and accommodation requirements for farm workers.

4. What analysis has the Department undertaken in relation to ensuring appropriate accommodation for workers in the agricultural sector? Have any guidelines been prepared?

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment is working with other Commonwealth agencies, state and territory agriculture departments and industry to support the supply of agricultural labour during the COVID-19 pandemic.

National Cabinet agreed that state and territory governments are responsible for ensuring accommodation complies with self-isolation and social distancing requirements, in conjunction with local governments and the NFF.

Each state and territory is implementing these arrangements to manage risks, taking into account current spread, vulnerability of their populations, and other circumstances specific to each state and territory and consistent with the principles agreed through National Cabinet.

The NFF's workplace guide also includes information for employers who are providing accommodation to staff during the pandemic.

5. What engagement has the department had with the Victorian government initiative, designed to help unemployed people who want to find work in the farming sector? [Vic \$50m Agriculture Workforce Plan]

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment is regularly engaging with states and territory agriculture departments to implement arrangements to support the agricultural workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The department has been briefed on the initiative as it has been rolled out, through discussion at Agriculture Senior Officials meetings. Senior Agriculture Industry Engagement Officer, Mark Tucker was also made aware of the initiative through meetings with Agriculture Victoria's COVID-19 Stakeholder Reference Group.

To support this and similar initiatives, the Australian Government has kept labour market testing requirements in place for Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme programs which requires employers to advertise vacancies and give first preference to any suitable Australian job seeker.

6. What input has the Department had into the National Coordinating Mechanism and its supermarkets taskforce? What official from the Department is represented at the taskforce?

Ms Rosemary Deininger, A/g Deputy Secretary for the Policy, Innovation, Strategy, Fisheries & Forestry Group is the Department's representative at the Supermarkets Taskforce. The Department is also represented on the Supermarkets Taskforce's sub-groups: the Tiger Team group; the Border Clearances Working Group; and the Food Supply (formerly Home Delivery) Working Group and maintains awareness of activities undertaken through the Safety of Staff and Customers Working Group.

The Department has participated in the Agriculture (which Ms Deininger has co-chaired), Food and Grocery; Domestic Border Restrictions; Visas and Water National Coordinating Mechanism meetings. The Department contributed to these meetings by providing updates on activities to facilitate clearance of food and agricultural products at the border, assistance mechanisms for the agriculture sector and work to address food supply chain disruptions.