

**MICHAEL OUTRAM APM
COMMISSIONER
AUSTRALIAN BORDER FORCE
Opening Statement**

**ABF Senate Select Committee on COVID-19
Tuesday 5 May 2020**

Senators,

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide an opening statement.

Since late January, the Australian Border Force has been at the forefront of Australia's response to COVID-19, successfully implementing a sequence of unprecedented measures at the border.

The ABF has a very clear role under the Customs Act, Migration Act and Maritime Powers Act. Whilst we are clear about our legislative responsibilities, collaboration and cooperation have been the hallmarks of our contribution to the Government's response.

My officers have responded superbly to the unique challenges we've thrown at them and I couldn't be more proud of them, including the way they have engaged with our colleagues in other agencies and sectors.

We've been working hand in hand with numerous agencies and departments, particularly across the Home Affairs Portfolio and with the Departments of Health; Foreign Affairs and Trade; Agriculture, Water and the Environment; and Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications.

The need to work closely with colleagues in states, territories and industry has also never been greater. Our federated border arrangements serve us well and act as a force multiplier in problem solving; look at the National Cabinet and National Coordination Mechanism as two excellent examples.

At the operational level managing what is a complex system, our national border, also requires a broad and deep understanding about where legislative authority, responsibilities and accountabilities sit within each jurisdiction; this helps to ensure clarity and precision in terms of decision making and action.

Our travel restrictions and border controls have been widely recognised as a key factor in slowing spread of COVID-19 in Australia. The ABF was able to implement each tranche of restrictions within hours of the Government's decisions. This was not a simple process and our successful implementation of the restrictions reflects the professionalism, agility and dedication of staff across the ABF.

On the 27th of March, the Commonwealth Minister for Health, under the Human Biosecurity Emergency Declaration, issued a Determination that necessitated the departure of all foreign flagged cruise ships from Australian waters. On 28 April, the last of 28 foreign cruise ships left Australian waters; a result only achievable through the collaborative efforts of the ABF and its Commonwealth, state, territory and industry partners.

With respect to the Ruby Princess, which I know will be of keen interest to this Committee and its observers, there has been much commentary about the ABF and what it is, or isn't, responsible for. The role of the ABF is not an amorphous concept. Of the three overarching requirements that passengers have on arrival into Australia, the ABF are responsible for two – those being customs and immigration clearances.

In respect of biosecurity, I would refer you to the evidence given by Dr Murphy about Australia's human biosecurity arrangements and responsibilities. At the border, there are arrangements in place between the Department of Health, State and Territory Health Departments' Human Biosecurity officials and the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment who appear here with us today.

In respect of our 'bespoke' arrangements for the arrival of international cruise ships in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our nation's response to COVID-19 been necessarily bespoke, but that has not blurred lines of responsibility or shifted delegated authority. For example, in being assigned responsibility for implementing the cruise ship ban, the ABF increased the collective visibility of a cruise ship intending to make port and enacted arrangements to direct cruise ships to a particular ports. This was achieved by changing the gazettal of the major Australian ports under the Customs Act. This arrangement has in no way altered the statutory or delegated responsibilities of any organisation that operates at the border and has ensured that no breaches of the cruise ship ban have occurred.

The ABF has also played a critical role in the repatriation of Australian citizens and permanent residents. With the assistance of key partners, the ABF coordinated the rapid establishment of well-equipped quarantine facilities – firstly at Christmas Island and a little later at Howard Springs near Darwin.

Subsequently, we have continued to work with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as well as state and territory partners, to support the repatriation and quarantine of thousands of Australians and New Zealanders resident in Australia.

The ABF has also had an important role in securing the supply of personal protective equipment or PPE to Australia. By quickly implementing changes to Customs Act regulations, we have helped prevent price gauging, hoarding and non-commercial export of PPE, including face masks, sanitiser and gloves.

Beyond these specific roles and while concurrently managing the threat posed by COVID-19, the ABF has continued to work with partners, particularly industry, on how we can assist with the facilitation of trade and ensure that our borders, while currently restricted, are not closed. It is this work and our planning towards the eventual easing of restrictions that will see the ABF continue to play a vital role in Australia's COVID-19 response and recovery.

Thank you Chair.