

Administration of the Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy

Audit Report No.46 2011–12

Opening Statement by the Auditor-General

JCPAA Review 10 October 2012

1. The Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) was established in 1989 as an early detection and warning system to address the unique biosecurity risks that face Australia's northern region. The program operates in the coastal regions of northern Australia, between Broome and Cairns, and includes the islands of the Torres Strait.

It is implemented through:

- scientific surveillance activities designed to detect early signs of exotic pests, weeds and diseases;
- Torres Strait border operations aimed at reducing the risk of quarantine risk material entering the Torres Strait and mainland Australia from Papua New Guinea; and
- public awareness activities aimed at encouraging the public to report sightings of exotic pests, weeds and diseases and to comply with quarantine restrictions that apply to Torres Strait border movements.

2. The objective of the audit was to assess the effectiveness of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's administration of NAQS. The ANAO examined the program's:

- administrative and governance arrangements;
- processes for identifying biosecurity risks and conducting scientific activities;

- arrangements for managing the quarantine aspects of Torres Strait border movements; and
 - public awareness activities.
3. The ANAO found that DAFF has implemented effective arrangements to administer the NAQS program in line with the department's risk-based approach to biosecurity. These arrangements support the delivery of the program's diverse scientific and border operations activities.
 4. DAFF has established systems and processes to identify and review biosecurity risks and to target the delivery of animal and plant health scientific surveys.
 5. The department also has arrangements in place to manage the quarantine aspects of Torres Strait border movements, which focus on maintaining an ongoing presence in the Torres Strait, and informing stakeholders of their quarantine responsibilities as well as undertaking inspections to limit the movement of quarantine risk material.
 6. In recent years, the department has formalised and more clearly articulated the program's public awareness strategies to reflect biosecurity risks and strengthened its relationships with key stakeholders, particularly Indigenous communities.
 7. There are, however, aspects of the program's administration that could be improved to better inform management decision-making and to enable the department to demonstrate the achievements of the NAQS program. These include:
 - better managing scientific data;
 - improving the integrity of border operations data; and

- further strengthening the department's arrangements for measuring and reporting NAQS performance.
8. The report made three recommendations designed to: strengthen arrangements for managing scientific surveillance data; improve the integrity of border operations data; and build a more comprehensive performance measurement and reporting framework.
 9. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry agreed to all recommendations.
 10. The audit team and I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.