

Dr John Carter
Secretary
Joint Committee of Public Accounts & Audit
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Dr Carter

REVIEW OF AUSTRALIA'S QUARANTINE FUNCTION

I refer to the Inquiry by the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit into Australia's quarantine function. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (AFFA) has been asked to provide further information on Surra testing of native animals and imported food issues.

Please find attached written advice on these two issues in the same general format that AFFA has previously provided information to the Committee. Also attached is some briefing material relating to the Committee's proposed inspection of the Customs sea cargo container x-ray facilities in Melbourne on 28 November 2002.

If the Department can be of further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me directly on 02 6272 5365.

Yours sincerely

John Cahill
Executive Manager
Quarantine

26 November 2002

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION FROM AFFA FOR JCPAA

PURPOSE

To provide information to JCPAA members on risk categorisation of imported food and sanctions that apply where a food fails with particular reference to imports of spirits and other alcoholic beverages.

BACKGROUND

All imported food must comply with both Australia's quarantine laws as provided for in the Quarantine Act 1908 and the food safety requirements of the Imported Food Control Act 1992 (the IFC Act). Under the IFC Act food imported into Australia must comply with the food safety standards set down in the Australian Food Standards Code (FSC). These same standards also apply to food manufactured in Australia. The FSC contains requirements for labelling, substances added to food, contaminants and residues, microbiological and processing requirements.

The FSC is administered by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). FSANZ is responsible for conducting risk assessments on imported food, categorising food and advising AQIS on the tests to be applied to food. They also provide advice to AQIS on general matters relating to food safety and interpretation of the FSC.

AQIS is responsible for the provision of field services for inspection and sampling of imported food at the border in line with FSANZ's directives.

The Australian Customs Service (ACS) refers imported food to AQIS at the rates specified in the legislation for the different categories of imported food.

The current legislation provides for three categories of food, Risk category, Active surveillance category and Random surveillance category. The later two are generally referred to as "surveillance category" food. The number of samples that AQIS officers must inspect is also specified in the legislation.

Inspection of Risk category food

Risk category food is food that has the greatest potential to pose a risk to human health. (eg cooked prawns, oysters, soft cheeses)

The rate at which risk food must be inspected is set down in the Imported Food Control Regulations 1993. Under the current arrangements all risk food must be referred by ACS to AQIS for inspection.

The actual inspection intensity of risk category food is based on the performance history of the overseas producer (manufacturer or packer) of the food. There is a three tier inspection regime consisting of "Tightened", "Normal" and "Reduced".

Initially risk food is inspected at the "Tightened" rate (100% of imports). If five consecutive consignments pass inspection the rate is reduced to the "Normal" level where 1 in 4 consignments are inspected. Should a failure occur at any time the food reverts to the tightened rate again.

After a risk category food achieves twenty consecutive passes at the Normal level the inspection rate drops to the "Reduced" level where 1 in 20 consignments are selected for inspection. A food will remain at the reduced inspection rate unless a failure occurs. If a failure occurs the rate will be raised to either tightened or normal. Selection of consignments for inspection is done on a random basis.

Inspection of Active and Random surveillance category food

Active surveillance category food (eg. egg pulp and egg powder, all vegetable sprouts, kava and tofu) is referred by ACS to AQIS for inspection at the rate of 10% by country of origin.

All other food not in the risk category or active surveillance category is categorised as Random surveillance category food which is referred by ACS to AQIS for inspection at the rate of 5% (eg spirits and all other alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, hard cheeses, vegetables, fruit etc).

Where an Active or Random surveillance category food fails inspection the owner of a failed food must either treat the food to bring it into compliance (treat includes relabelling), re-export the food or destroy the food.

Additionally where a failure occurs for surveillance food, AQIS applies a Holding Order to that food. A Holding Order covers the food from the producer. Consignments of food subject to a holding order are referred to AQIS for inspection in the same manner as risk category food. If the food achieves 5 consecutive passes the Holding Order will be revoked.

Companies who regularly import food should be familiar with the food safety requirements in respect to the food they import, including the labelling requirements and many take measures to ensure that their food is labelled correctly. However, there are numerous low volume importers such as one off or opportunist importers and these tend to have little or no familiarity with the food safety requirements for the food they import.

The latter are often more likely to be associated with importations of food that has been bought off the shelf from retailers and wholesalers rather than directly through established overseas suppliers. Food purchased off the shelf is often food that was never intended for export nor prepared by a manufacturer to meet external market requirements. Consequently when inspected by AQIS these foods often fail and a holding order is applied to the food.

Under the current arrangements this holding order applies to the food and the overseas producer so the impact is also on routine importers who have taken steps to ensure that their food complies with Australian standards.

In line with the recommendations from the National Competition Policy Review of the Imported Food Control Act 1992, AQIS in consultation with FSANZ and industry is developing a performance based inspection system for surveillance category food.

Implementation of the proposed new system will be subject to successfully amending the existing legislation.

Under the new system, instead of the rigid 100%, 10% and 5% inspection regimes, food with an intrinsic lower risk (such as spirits) and a strong compliance history could be subjected to a very low intensity inspection regime. However food with higher levels of intrinsic risk and /or poor compliance history will be subject to a higher inspection intensity.

Additionally under the proposed new system, the importers will be targeted for labelling non-compliances rather than the food itself. Thus it would be a more equitable system that would reward those importers who take measures to ensure their food is correctly labelled and otherwise in compliance with Australia's food safety standards.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION FROM AFFA FOR JCPAA

PURPOSE

To provide background information to JCPAA members on the Australian Customs Service (Customs) sea cargo container x-ray facility in Melbourne.

ISSUES

Customs have strengthened border protection controls with the introduction of new container x-ray machines. AQIS sees the introduction of the container x-ray facility as an additional tool for maintaining Australia's quarantine integrity at the border.

As part of the increased quarantine intervention arrangements, AQIS is required by Government to inspect the external surfaces of all containers that exit container terminals and wharf areas to ensure that only contaminant-free containers are released. This is in addition to the continued inspection of all material of quarantine concern.

X-raying sea cargo containers by Customs requires the movement of containers from the wharf to x-ray facility. AQIS and Customs have agreed arrangements for moving targeted containers from the wharf terminal to the x-ray facility, whilst maintaining quarantine integrity. A National Standard Operating Procedure between AQIS and Customs sets out procedures for managing contaminated containers that have been selected for x-ray examination.

All containers that are to be referred to the Customs container x-ray facility for inspection will have been externally inspected by AQIS to determine that the container is free of quarantine contamination or infestation.

In addition, based on Customs estimates of the number of containers that will be referred to the x-ray facility each day, AQIS expects at least two x-rayed containers per day will have potential quarantine issues associated with their contents. AQIS will have a permanent presence at the x-ray facility with up to six AQIS officers permanently stationed and available to assist in the relevant inspections. However, the duties of these AQIS officers will not be limited solely to the x-ray facility, but will encompass other cargo and quarantine inspection activities at the port.

AQIS staff will not be directly involved in any Customs examination except when required to provide expert advice or to take appropriate action when quarantine goods or items of interest to AQIS are located. Customs will immediately refer to AQIS any appropriate items of quarantine concern they consider warrant examination by AQIS.

As evidenced above, a cooperative approach has been taken by AQIS and Customs to maximise the potential of the container x-ray facility, ensuring the smooth movement of containers through the wharf environment and maintaining quarantine integrity.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION FROM AFFA FOR JCPAA

ISSUE

Surra testing on Native Animals.

BACKGROUND

Native fauna cannot be sampled as readily as domestic animals, livestock or feral animals. Domestic companion animals and livestock, by their very nature, are controlled by humans and can be made available for census and non-destructive examination and sampling. Feral animals can be sampled by shooting and subsequent autopsy.

Many of these animals share traits (physical size and habitat preference) with livestock, which enables them to be more readily located and sampled. Fauna on the other hand, can be difficult to locate (many species are nocturnal and arboreal), are difficult to capture (assuming that we wish to sample non-destructively), and frequently suffer post capture stress and mortality.

There is also a potential technical difficulty with monitoring for incursion of Surra in marsupials through blood sampling. NAQS uses serological testing to routinely monitor for Surra in cattle and pigs. The disease is chronic in these species, resulting in a long time period following infection in which the animal will be positive if tested.

The limited amount of research done in marsupials indicates that the disease is acute and fatal in at least two species of wallaby. This means that the majority of infected individuals would be unlikely to survive long enough to be tested. It also means that increased mortality in susceptible species is likely to be the first indication of incursion of Surra.

NAQS invests heavily in public awareness, thus increased mortality in marsupials should be reported to NAQS or State agencies. NAQS would respond by investigation of increased mortality in the far north in cooperation with the State agencies.