



AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES  
AND FORESTRY - AUSTRALIA

**AQIS**  
*Protecting our way of life!*

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## **AQIS Submission**

**to the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit**

**Inquiry into Coastwatch**

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**June 2000**

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## **1. Introduction**

The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) is a major operational group with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (AFFA).

### **1.1 AFFA Vision**

The strength and viability of our agricultural, food, fisheries and forest industries affect the quality of life of all Australians. The outcome that AFFA aims to achieve is:

- *Increasing the profitability, competitiveness and sustainability of Australian agricultural, food, fisheries and forestry industries to achieve a greater national wealth and stronger rural and regional communities.*

### **1.2 AQIS Vision**

As an operating group within AFFA AQIS shares the goal of a more competitive, profitable and sustainable Australian industry.

The AQIS vision is to ensure:

1. *market access worldwide for Australian exports through international negotiations and efficient AQIS certification systems;*
2. *protection of Australia's agricultural production, consumers and environment through efficient AQIS inspection systems; and*
3. *protection of human health and the health of the Australian flora and fauna through efficient quarantine systems.*

### **1.3 The AQIS Corporate Mission**

The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, in partnership with industry and the community, will deliver quality services that improve Australia's competitive position, and protect its animal, plant and human health and the environment.

## **2. Background**

AQIS is a major stakeholder in Coastwatch as it provides AQIS with an important capability to help prevent incursions of animal and plant exotic pests and diseases which could have a direct impact on access to key overseas markets for Australian agricultural products. The arrival of unauthorised vessels and aircraft into Australia are of particular concern to AQIS and its many stakeholders. These aircraft, vessels, their passengers and cargo have in the past been detected carrying a range of exotic pests, diseases and weeds that could be introduced into Australia if the quarantine risk was not properly managed. The tasking of Coastwatch assets to detect these arrivals is an important component of AQIS' strategy to manage these quarantine risks.

In most cases the actual taskings of Coastwatch assets are co-ordinated and lodged by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs for Suspect Illegal Entry Vessels (SIEV's), the Australian Fisheries Management Authority for Foreign Fishing Vessels (FFV's) and other agencies. AQIS has a direct interest in all taskings as these same vessels are also AQIS targets.

AQIS has developed a strong working relationship with Coastwatch at both a national and regional level. AQIS utilises Coastwatch assets for ongoing and specific quarantine surveillance. Taskings involve the use of air and surface assets primarily across northern Australia.

AQIS is the primary user of the single engine Coastwatch helicopter in the Torres Strait. This is used for disease monitoring and control work. This is the only effective way of moving quickly between islands and within the Northern Peninsula Area (NPA) to collect traps and provide a quick response to pest and disease incursions in remote locations. The additional twin engine helicopter has improved flexibility during peak demand periods (eg wet season with increased fruit fly monitoring and response activity). Access to the Coastwatch helicopter allows AQIS to visit any of the 18 inhabited islands plus the uninhabited islands across the 39,000 square kilometres of the Torres Strait for pest and disease monitoring including regular checks of fruit fly traps.

A reduction in the total hours available for the Single Engine helicopter could adversely effect AQIS' monitoring programs in the Torres Strait. To date, Coastwatch has given AQIS taskings a high priority and AQIS is keen to see this arrangement continue. The early detection of incursions in the Torres Strait and NPA is an important element of the pest and disease strategy and AQIS stakeholders are likely to be concerned if this very important program is adversely effected due to a reduction in helicopter flying time.

As indicated in the table below, there has been a significant increase during the last three years in the number of SIEV's and the Suspect Unlawful Non Citizens (SUNC's) on board these vessels. The following is a summary of the statistics for the last three years:

<i>Financial Year</i>	<i>Number of Unauthorised Passengers</i>	<i>Number of Crew</i>	<i>Number of Vessels</i>
1999 / 2000 ( <i>to date</i> )	4037	234	73
1998 / 1999	923	91	42
1997 / 1998	190	20	11

*Source:* Statistics provided by Coastwatch May 2000.

The countries from which these vessels have departed generally have a large number of serious pests, weeds and diseases that are exotic to Australia. This includes Foot and Mouth Disease, Rabies, Screw Worm Fly, fruit flies, rats, mosquitos which carry diseases of concern to human health and weeds such as Siam Weed.

The arrival of SIEV's exposes Australia to increased risk of incursions from these pests, weeds and diseases. AQIS staff typically remove and oversee the disposal of large quantities of quarantine material from these vessels.

Coastwatch advises that of the 73 vessels that have arrived in Australian waters or have landed on Australian territory during the current financial year, 69 have been detected by surveillance agencies before landing on the Australian mainland – this equates to 95% of all unauthorised vessel arrivals being intercepted before landing compared with 74% of vessels being detected prior to landing during the 1998 / 1999 financial year.

Ashmore Reef appears to be the primary destination for the unauthorised vessels. The Reef is within Australian territory and is located approximately 400 km off the north west coast of Western Australia and 900 km west of Darwin – it is only 160 km south of Indonesia and can be reached by motorised vessel in a day. The detection of and initial contact with SIEV's and SUNC's on or near Ashmore Reef rather than mainland Australia provides a valuable capacity to manage and contain any quarantine risk that may be presented by the arrival of these vessels and passengers.

Staff from AQIS' Northern Australian Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) recently conducted a pest and disease survey on a number of the islands off the northwest coast (including Ashmore Reef). The detailed findings are not yet available but no major pests or diseases of specific risk to Australia appear to have been identified on the reef.

Recommendation 15 of the Prime Minister's Taskforce on Coastal Surveillance recommended the development of a National Protocol between Commonwealth, the States and Territories for the management of illegal landings.

As the agencies with primary responsibility for managing unauthorised arrival situations, the Australian Customs Service and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs have developed a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and 'Guidelines for the Response by Commonwealth Agencies and State / Territory Police to an Illegal Landing of a Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel on Australian Territory'.

AQIS together with the other relevant agencies has provided input into the MOU and the Guidelines which includes quarantine requirements for managing these situations. The MOU has now been signed by the Border agencies and all State / Territory Police forces.

### **3. Current Arrangements with Coastwatch**

AQIS is an active member of the Coastwatch Operational Planning Advisory Committee (OPAC) and Regional Operational Planning Advisory Committees (ROPAC) in Cairns, Darwin and Broome. These committees oversee the Coastwatch surveillance programs and AQIS regularly submits taskings to the OPAC meetings where the requests from all clients are considered.

AQIS is also involved in the response to the arrival of all SIEV's. AQIS has arrangements in place to maintain 24-hour contact with Coastwatch and other relevant agencies. Coastwatch advises AQIS each time a vessel is detected. When a vessel is detected off the coast of Australia (including on Ashmore Reef) the Royal Australian Navy and / or Customs have primary responsibility for transporting the SUNC's (and the vessel if appropriate) to the mainland. This is done in consultation with AQIS to ensure any issues of quarantine concern are properly managed. AQIS officers play a significant role in clearing and processing the SUNC's and the vessel on arrival at an Australian mainland port. SUNC's arriving off the north western coastline are usually transported to Broome or Darwin for processing before being moved to Immigration detention centres.

In cases where an unauthorised vessel makes an undetected landing on the mainland, AQIS is involved in the response party that travels to the incursion site. Under the *Quarantine Act, 1908* it is an offence for any person or item to be removed from the vessel without the approval of a Quarantine Officer. Some Customs officers also hold quarantine powers under the Customs Act, 1901 as well as delegations under the Quarantine Act, 1908. In practice, the two agencies work closely together to manage the often complex issues arising from SIEV arrivals.

#### **4. Expectations**

AQIS expects to continue to receive a high priority in the allocation of Coastwatch resources, given the high risk posed to the Australia from an exotic pest or disease incursion. As an illustration of this, the introduction of Papaya Fruit Fly into Australia in 1995 cost \$34 million (Source - Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management) to eradicate and caused lost export income and other costs of about \$100 million (Source - Queensland Department of Primary Industries).

The Torres Strait is a very high risk area in relation to potential pest and disease incursions. Given the topography of the area, Coastwatch resources are essential for NAQS to achieve it's objective of providing early warning and detection of exotic pests, diseases and weeds in that region. NAQS relies on the Coastwatch helicopter to pick up and deliver personnel and equipment throughout the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula Area of Cape York.

AQIS expects that Coastwatch resources will continue to be concentrated in northern Australia which is the area that is at most risk from the unauthorised entry of foreign fishing vessels and SIEVs. These vessels and their contents pose a significant quarantine threat which could put at risk agricultural industries valued at approximately \$28 billion, as well as adversely affect Australia's human health status.

Where Coastwatch surveillance activity detects an unauthorised vessel or other issue of potential quarantine interest AQIS expects to be notified as a matter of priority to facilitate the necessary response. AQIS has provided Coastwatch with details to ensure timely advice can be provided.

AQIS expects to receive timely and accurate information on surveillance activities to assist operational planning and risk prioritisation.

## **5. Relationship with Coastwatch**

AQIS enjoys a good relationship with Coastwatch and attends all OPAC and ROPAC meetings. The recent amendments to the *Customs Act, 1901* that give Customs Officers the power to investigate and enforce some provisions of the *Quarantine Act, 1908* requires careful co-ordination to ensure the often complex technical issues involved in quarantine decision making are not compromised. The Australian Customs Service (ACS) recognises this requirement and all staff involved have received training and do contact regional AQIS staff in cases of uncertainty.

The focus of the Prime Minister's Coastal Surveillance Taskforce Report was primarily on immigration and customs controls and operations. The implementation of recommendations has therefore had limited direct impact on AQIS although the proposed changes to Coastwatch, which strengthen surveillance and detection capabilities, enhance Australia's ability to protect its \$28 billion per annum agricultural industries. The particular areas which will have an impact on AQIS include amendments to the legislation empowering Customs Officers to undertake activities on behalf of AQIS and the development of a Protocol encompassing the operations of all relevant agencies in handling SIEV's and SUNC's.

There needs to continue to be full recognition that AQIS has a legitimate ongoing interest in Coastwatch activities and taskings and that an effective partnership needs to continue to be in place between Coastwatch, AQIS and other relevant agencies to properly manage these interests. To this end, consideration could be given to the composition of OPAC to ensure only agencies with a direct interest in Coastwatch operational planning attend.

Agencies involved should nominate a senior officer who is able to speak for and make commitment on behalf of their respective agency.

Other agencies could be invited if specific issues need to be resolved or as observers.

The ROPAC should reflect this same membership at a regional level.

AQIS provides training to key ACS and Coastwatch staff to ensure they have an appreciation of the importance of strict quarantine controls.

## **6. Effectiveness of Resource Allocation**

AQIS quarantine operations are fully cost recovered from industry and through revenue provided from other sources such as the Passenger Movement Charge. The significant additional costs that AQIS has incurred due to the increase in SIEV's has put pressure on the organisation's limited resources. AQIS is not able to recover the direct cost of inspecting and clearing these vessels from their owners / operators. The cost is therefore effectively being met through existing cost recovery mechanisms. The cost of AQIS operational services required to manage the quarantine risks associated with SIEV activities is currently estimated to be \$100 000 per annum.

In general AQIS is satisfied with the effectiveness of Coastwatch's resource allocation. On most occasions AQIS approved taskings have been undertaken in a timely and effective manner. AQIS has experienced some problems with assets not functioning at full capacity (eg. Coastwatch co-ordinated vessels not being able to fully complete AQIS activities or crew restrictions with the helicopter). These issues have been identified with Coastwatch and AQIS concerns have been noted.

## **7. Use of New Technology**

Although AQIS has not utilised the new night vision equipment that Coastwatch now operate, other clients have indicated that it provides a much improved surveillance capability. The detection of SIEV's has a direct benefit to AQIS and its stakeholders as it is able to ensure appropriate quarantine controls are applied at the time of detection.

AQIS is keenly awaiting the introduction of the new Coastwatch Reporting Information System (CRIS) that will replace the present system of coded faxes that officers of client agencies are currently receiving. Screening these reports takes a great deal of time and effort, and important targets can easily be missed. The new system will screen out all information that is not relevant to the specific agency.

## **8. Summary**

AQIS currently enjoys an excellent relationship with Coastwatch and the two organisations are focused on the early detection of illegal entry vessels, aircraft, their passengers and cargo.

Although AQIS is not a major tasker of Coastwatch assets it has a direct interest in their deployment. Where other agencies (primarily DIMA, ACS and AFMA) continue to provide the effective basis to task assets, AQIS will continue to take a keen interest in the process and attend all key planning meetings. The use of the helicopter in the Torres Strait and the NPA is of particular interest to AQIS and its stakeholders.



AQIS is keen to ensure careful co-ordination of assets to minimise the demand on its limited resources. AQIS is required to recover 100% of its operational costs and a continuation in the growth of SIEV arrivals could adversely affect the services provided by AQIS to clients and industries which pay for these services. AQIS is working closely with ACS and Coastwatch to ensure appropriate quarantine safeguards are in place without overlap.

AQIS is a major stakeholder in Coastwatch's operations as it is an important element in Australia's quarantine protection system. Any changes to Australia's coastal surveillance system will be of direct interest to AQIS and its stakeholders.