



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Agriculture**

**SECRETARY**

Ref:

Senator the Hon. Bill Heffernan  
 Chair  
 Senate Rural and Regional Affairs Legislation Committee  
 Parliament House  
 Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senator Heffernan

I am writing to provide further information to the Committee following my evidence in the Additional Estimates hearings of Monday 23 February 2015.

Specifically, I refer to evidence I provided in regard to the FOI processing of documents concerning alterations to House of Representatives Hansard in October 2014.

Among other things, I advised the committee that that the department held a document that may have been within the scope of an FOI request to the Minister for Agriculture.

I made two statements because, as a result of evidence given earlier in the day, I formed a suspicion that a key document had not been released through FOI by the Minister for Agriculture's FOI decision maker. I wanted to ensure that the Committee was not left in any doubt about the existence of a document held by the department that may have been within scope of the FOI request (hence, my second statement which was made by me to ensure that there could be no doubt on this point). In doing so, I took great care to recognise that I was not the FOI decision maker (in recognition that any decisions are taken in accordance with the Act, and it is not my role to determine whether a valid FOI decision has been made or not).

Subsequent actions (in particular, the tabling of the document by the Minister in the House of Representatives on Tuesday 24 February) and my further inquiries within the department, including new information my officers had not previously provided to me and a telephone call with the Minister's Chief of Staff, have confirmed my concerns to have been correct.

Without my intervention I considered there was great danger of the Committee being inadvertently misled as to the existence of such a document, which it now seems was never released under FOI.

I have further relevant information that would, I believe, be highly pertinent to the Committee's consideration of the broad context in which I considered that the further evidence I provided was necessary.

This includes specific information relating to the original alterations made to Hansard and the multiple actions I took personally at the time to seek rectification, including a personal meeting with the Minister before the alterations became public (that is, before questions relating to the alterations were first raised in the House of Representatives on the afternoon of Monday 27 October 2014.)

As these matters go to integrity and accountability, I would welcome an early opportunity to provide further evidence in person to the Committee if it so resolved to call such a supplementary hearing and request my attendance.

In relation to evidence provided more broadly regarding the process for referring FOI requests between the department and the Minister's Office, and the specific referral in question, I will ensure that the evidence is reviewed carefully. If the Committee decides to convene a supplementary hearing, I would also welcome an opportunity to inform the Committee of the steps I am taking and provide an update on any preliminary conclusions to this point. In any event, I will ensure that, should corrections be required, they will be provided openly and frankly. This is consistent with my strong commitment to ensuring the department remains accountable and preserves a reputation for acting impartially.

I have copied this letter to your Deputy Chair, Senator Sterle, and to Senator Cameron who led questions in relation to this matter at the hearing. I have also copied this letter to the Minister and Parliamentary Secretary.

Yours sincerely

Paul Grimes  
2 March 2015