

Senate Standing Committee on Economics

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Resources, Energy and Tourism Portfolio

Additional Budget Estimates 2009

26 February 2009

Question: AR7

Topic: National Tourism Incident Response Plan (NTIRP)

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Senator Ronaldson asked:

- (a) When was the NTIRP last reviewed?
- (b) When was the last meeting of the NTIRP Monitoring Group?
- (c) How many Tourism division staff have been allocated to the management and updating of the NTIRP?
- (d) The RET website lists October 2005 as the last time the NTIRP Activation Level was changed. In the time since, has there been any meeting of the Monitoring group? If not, why not?
- (e) Why has there been no downgrade in the Activation level since it was elevated to Green in the wake of the Avian flu outbreak?

Answer:

- (a) The last review of the NTIRP was undertaken during 2006, following Exercise Polo: a simulation exercise which took place in March 2006. The review resulted in the publication of a new version of the NTIRP, dated January 2007. An internal review began in January 2009 and is currently in progress.
- (b) The most recent meeting of the NTIRP Monitoring Group was held on Monday 12 March 2007.
- (c) Approximately 0.5 Average Staffing Level has been allocated to the management and updating of the NTIRP.
- (d) The Monitoring Group was convened on Monday 16 February 2009 in relation to the Victorian Bushfires incident, and met via teleconference on Wednesday 11 March 2009. The Monitoring Group was contacted in September 2007 with regard to tourism impacts of the equine influenza, and also in April 2007 with regard to the tsunami warning for the Eastern Australia coastline. There was a meeting of the Monitoring Group on Monday 12 March 2007 via teleconference.

It is important to note that the Monitoring Group is not involved in the activation level decision making process in all instances. The Australian Standing Committee on

Tourism (ASCOT) can decide whether to heighten the activation level without consultation with the Monitoring Group.

(e) The NTIRP is currently activated at Green – Guarded Risk – watching brief level in recognition of the continued threat of an outbreak of Avian Influenza. The World Health Organisation (WHO) is currently at phase 3 of alert in the Global Influenza Preparedness Plan. The WHO is concerned that an avian influenza virus and a human influenza virus might mix, resulting in a new strain of influenza virus that could be easily passed from person to person. This could trigger an “influenza pandemic”, where the disease spreads rapidly around the world, infecting many people.

Australia is currently at Overseas 3 level of pandemic threat alert, where there is human infection overseas but no human to human spread. The Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing states that "Health authorities are concerned about the possibility that an entirely new form of influenza could develop and cause an influenza pandemic if bird flu were to evolve into a form that is able to be transmitted easily between people and cause widespread disease and severe illness". This would, of course, have major implications for the Australian tourism industry and therefore requires on-going monitoring.