

**Senate Standing Committee on Economics**  
**ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE**  
Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Portfolio  
Budget Estimates Hearing 2009-10  
01 June 2009

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**AGENCY/DEPARTMENT:** INNOVATION, INDUSTRY, SCIENCE AND RESEARCH

**TOPIC:** Australian Biosecurity CRC for Emerging Infectious Diseases

**REFERENCE:** Written Question – Senator Eggleston

**QUESTION No.:** BI-12

Given that the Australian Biosecurity CRC (ABCRC) for Emerging Infectious Diseases research has focused on such areas as avian and equine influenza, where exotic animal diseases impinge on human health, areas which would have been applicable to swine flu, why did the ABCRC not get a second round of funding, nor even an opportunity to put its case for vital public health research? What alternatives are there to fund ABCRC research now given the threat of a swine flu virus pandemic?

In the face of the current disease climate, with new threats being discovered every year, what were the specific reasons for the decision not to re-fund the Australian Biosecurity CRC for Emerging Infectious Diseases?

Were the implications of this decision on national disease preparedness taken into account?

With the current swine flu epidemic, and the equine flu of two years ago, and the on-going threat of avian flu, does the lack of funding indicate a lack of concern about new pandemics?

New infectious disease threats arise annually, with at least one disease, Nipah Virus, threatening to be a highly pathogenic disease with global potential. Shouldn't Australia continue to investigate such a threat?

Did the funding decision take into account the significant benefit to cost ratio achieved by the CRC, as determined by independent assessors?

The new CRC was attempting to engender 'over-the-horizon' early warning of disease threats through establishing joint research and diagnostic strategies between Australian and SE Asian laboratories (also building trust between this country and our neighbours) – Are there any other alternatives and shouldn't this be a major government initiative?

Will sufficient and urgent feedback be given to the ABCRC to assist them in submitting a revised proposal for round 12?

## ANSWER

The CRC selection process is a merit-based competitive process undertaken by an independent, expert, CRC Committee which is responsible for making recommendations to the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research on the applications to be supported. The Committee took into account all information provided in the applications, including the estimated cost benefits, and assessed each application on its merits against the three selection criteria. On this occasion, the Committee considered that the application from Australian Biosecurity CRC (ABCRC) for Emerging Infectious Diseases was not as competitive against the selection criteria as other applications. The Minister will announce his decision in relation to funding of applications received in the 11<sup>th</sup> CRC Selection Round following consideration of the recommendations of the CRC Committee.

On 26 May 2009, Senator Carr announced the Government's commitment to annual CRC selection rounds and that the 12<sup>th</sup> selection round will be held this year. Applications for the 12<sup>th</sup> selection round will close on 14 August 2009. The Australian Biosecurity CRC is able to apply in the 12<sup>th</sup> selection round.

The CRC Committee has now provided written feedback to applicants that were not invited to Stage 2 of the selection process. These applicants have also been offered the opportunity to discuss the outcome with the Chair of the CRC Committee and the Department. ABCRC has availed itself of this opportunity. This feedback will assist applicants that intend submitting an application for the 12<sup>th</sup> Selection Round.

Other alternate sources of funding for the Australian Biosecurity CRC include the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council. The Australian Biosecurity CRC may also wish to discuss funding options with the Department of Health and Ageing and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry which have significant responsibilities in the area of biosecurity.

The Government is strongly committed to ensuring Australia is prepared now and in the future to deal with pandemics. In December 2008, the Government released the Beale report which reviewed Australia's quarantine and biosecurity arrangements. The Government is now considering its detailed response to the review including working more closely with State and Territory Governments and establishing a National Biosecurity Agreement and also establishing a National Biosecurity Commission.

*The Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza (AHMPPI)* is a national health plan for responding to an influenza pandemic, based on international best practice and evidence. This plan is being implemented now with the outbreak of outbreak of the H1N1 Influenza 09 (Pandemic (H1N1) 2009).