

A need for fast-track reforms in Australian biosecurity

The Australian biosecurity systems are under strain and changes are urgently needed, FTA's Sal Milici writes

AS A DISTANT ISLAND AUSTRALIA

has been blessed with natural biosecurity shields since First Nations Australians first inhabited the continent 65,000 years ago.

Containerisation in the 1960s together with the advent of globalisation in the 1990s played a big part in essentially removing those natural defences.

Fast forward to 2022 and changing trade patterns, increased trade volumes and the effects of climate change have seen us arrive at a critical crossroad.

A multitude of new, emerging risks are threatening to arrive on Australia's doorstep. These include foot-and-mouth disease, varroa mite, lumpy skin disease, African swine fever and Japanese encephalitis.

Add to this the ongoing battles to combat brown marmorated stink bug, khapra beetle, and giant African snail. Any of these would cause devastating harm to sectors of Australia's critical agriculture industry.

Substantial resources are understandably and welcomingly being dedicated to combat the emerging risks. This is being performed for the most part by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

However, the hard-working officers and executives of DAFF are fighting this (almost invisible) war in a biosecurity system straining from decades of under-funding, which has resulted in a lack of resources both human and other.

Additionally, significant systemic failures have been identified by a number of reports written by the Office of the Inspector-General Biosecurity – an independent office reporting to the Parliament of Australia rather than any specific minister. This office is still fairly new, having been established under the *Biosecurity Act 2015* and has been vital in shining a light on many of the shortcomings of Australia's biosecurity

system – shortcomings many of which are in the process of being reformed.

CHALLENGES FACED BY INDUSTRY

Chronic delays to bookings, inspections and to a lesser extent document assessments are regularly reported by our members.

Imported food and machinery inspections are often particularly impacted due to the limited number of duly qualified biosecurity officers.

An ongoing challenge is the lack of clarity to the extent of any delays. I will often watch Essendon lose another AFL match and order some Uber Eats to console myself on a busy Friday night. Whilst the time from order to delivery may be prolonged due to volume, I am able to see a real-time update on when I can expect my pizza to arrive. The knowledge of the delays allows me to prepare and also to inform any relevant stakeholders (i.e. my kids).

The international trade facilitation sector is desperate for similar transparency from DAFF. This way the industry can inform their customers of delays well in advance of the delay occurring.

Freight and Trade Alliance has been engaging with DAFF for some time to provide a dashboard with real-time updates on performance around the three key metrics of document assessment, bookings and inspection. Difficulty in obtaining this data from ancient legacy systems will make this a long-term project. However, in the interim a weekly report from DAFF on these key metrics would be invaluable.

Our members report the process to obtain import permits is also being extensively delayed.

Trade liberalisation and signing of free-trade agreements with like-minded nations is always welcomed. But trade facilitation of the commerce covered by critical international trade must also be part of the trade liberalisation process.

THE ANSWER

Reforms (many urgent) have been identified and called for by the inspector general biosecurity – (IGB). DAFF has received 205 recommendations across 16 IGB reviews. As at March 2022, 95 IGB recommendations remained open.

Of most concern, the IGB review “Adequacy of department's operational model to effectively mitigate biosecurity risks in evolving risk and business environments” was issued in February 2021. At the time of publishing of the Commonwealth Biosecurity 2030 Action Plan 2022 all 19 recommendations made remain open.

The final recommendation of this review states:

“There are four reform priorities that must be progressed concomitantly, with appropriate strategy, resourcing and timelines for each, if the department is going to free itself from current debilitating drag on its performance and set itself on a course to confidently deliver excellent biosecurity outcomes towards 2025 and beyond:

1. Regulatory maturity
2. Risk pathway partnership
3. Frontline focus
4. Sustainable funding model.”

FTA's position remains that reforms be fast-tracked that enable Australia's biosecurity regime to not only be maintained but strengthened and simultaneously focusing on the expeditious facilitation of critical international trade at the border. We can (and must) have both and without a moment to lose. ■



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