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# Interview

## Working together to succeed at the border

Michael Outram, Australian Border Force Commissioner recently spoke with Paul Zalai from the Freight & Trade Alliance (FTA) to share insights from pandemic border restrictions and crisis management as well as current challenges and opportunities facing the Australian Border Force. The full interview is accessible online <https://register.gotowebinar.com/recording/recordingView?webinarKey=6906356219534637663&registrantEmail=pzalai%40FTAlliance.com.au>

Earlier this year the Commissioner addressed members of the Freight & Trade Alliance, who were interested to learn about the government's simplified trade system agenda, regulatory changes and the future of the integrated cargo system.

The Australian Border Force (ABF) is responsible for protecting the Australian community from the movement of illicit goods; and is the second largest collector of revenue for Government and it has a pivotal role in economic success through trade.

The ABF responded to the global pandemic by closing and opening the border and diverting resources

to coordinate the whole of Australian government response, including the establishment of quarantine facilities.

### **Paul Zalai – Commissioner, what lessons did the ABF learn from the pandemic?**

Organisations can never fully prepare for a crisis but working on culture before crisis is critical. Undertaking training and scenario planning, having a clear line of command, and having mature apparatus saves time in a crisis. Although the ABF started with virtually a blank canvas for global pandemics, operationally we had strengthened our command, control and coordination doctrine. We also had expertise coordinating stakeholders,

including state and federal government, senior representatives in industry and the media.

**Paul Zalai - Labour shortage is a major issue for commerce – how do you attract, train and retain staff at the ABF?**

The ABF runs a base recruitment round twice per year, for which it is generally oversubscribed. We also benefit from lateral transfers which is one way we actively encourage diversity in our leadership. We know our people are deeply committed to the mission of protecting Australia.

We are also making sure our workplace is one at which our people enjoy working. Most significantly, this includes a long-term partnering with the Australian Human Rights Commission to make sure our workplace is respectful, diverse and inclusive.

**Paul Zalai - Did the temporary redeployment of staff during the pandemic increase the ABF's success with examinations and interdictions?**

Redeployment of 200-300 people from aviation travel and cruise ships into our mail and cargo operations increased heroin detections by 250 percent. By weight, detections of cocaine increased by 237 percent and precursor detections increased by 360 percent. We can now calculate the benefit to our country of every Border Force Officer that we put into supply chain operations.

**Paul Zalai - How does the ABF measure its success?**

Our primary measure is harm reduction. We calculate the value of harm from every tonne of meth and then we seek to



*ABF officers involved with Operation Tin Can*

take that harm out of the system. Harm includes health costs, law enforcement costs, detention costs and correction costs. We also collect revenue from passenger processing charges, or duty, totalling about \$20 billion each year. There is always opportunity to reduce leakage and fraud in that area. It is not all enforcement. We are also working to improve our contribution to economic productivity through our facilitation role.

**Paul Zalai - What can industry do to help the ABF ensure adequate border protection without unnecessarily impeding trade?**

Australia has fallen behind other countries with more advanced border systems. A digital border is essential for future trade and border protection. Australia needs to integrate industry and government data and technology to better screen and pre-clear travellers and goods entering the country. We have to trust each other, invest together, and create secure areas to use data in mutually beneficial ways before people and goods arrive in the country.

**Paul Zalai - Will licensing continue or expand in the future?**

Licensing and the issue of permits will continue to be an important part of managing the border and the risks for the border of the future. The Simplified Trade System Taskforce is looking at digitisation, employing the 'tell us once' approach, and offering a seamless border controls interface for users.

Operation Jardena, which has been profiling the Australian border from a criminal infiltration point of view, has shown us that freight forwarders, licensed brokers, depot operators and customs brokers need to stay on the radar as we build a fit for purpose licensing regime. The ability to cancel licences and permits addresses risks without the need for lengthy investigation and prosecution processes.

**Paul Zalai - What is the future of the Integrated Cargo System?**

While the ICS is serving its purpose and is critical for our border, it is an ageing system. The current platform has rigid reporting structures legislated in the Customs Act and does not allow for simple and low risk changes. ICS systems architecture is also expensive to enhance or update.

Modernising and designing a next generation cargo system is necessary to enable interoperability within and across industry and other government services.

We have learned lessons from our colleagues in Singapore, US, and the Netherlands that incremental upgrades are preferable to a big bang approach. Modernisation will remedy industry pain-points around manual preparation of complicated commercial documentation and duplication of data.



*Paul Zalai interviewing ABF Commissioner Michael Outram APM*

