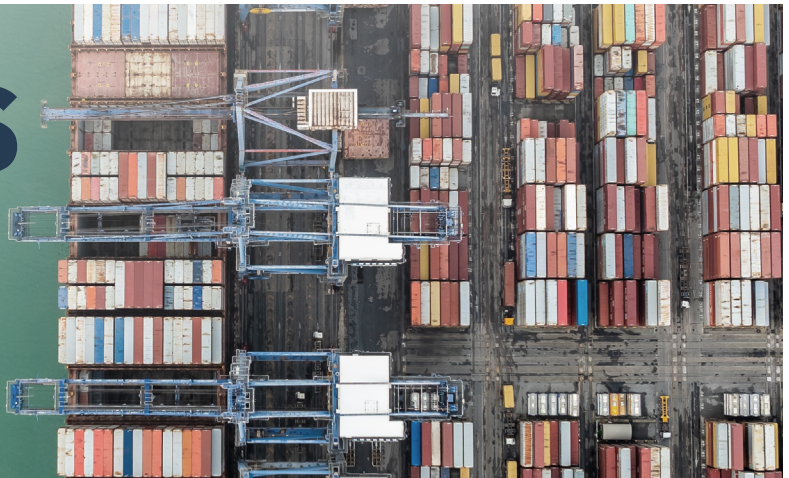


Strengthening Australia's SUPPLY CHAINS

*Sal Milici shares insights
from FTA's engagement in
an independent inquiry into
Australia's response to Covid-19*



The Covid-19 pandemic profoundly impacted global supply chains, revealing vulnerabilities and highlighting the critical importance of the freight and logistics sector in maintaining economic and societal stability.

Throughout this period, Freight & Trade Alliance and the Australian Peak Shippers Association represented the needs of the industry, working with state and federal governments to ensure the continuity of operations. A key achievement during this time was securing recognition of international freight and trade as an “essential service”.

This recognition was instrumental in keeping goods flowing when restrictions brought much of the world to a standstill. It allowed freight and logistics providers to maintain operations and highlighted the sector's role in supporting communities and economies.

In the early stages of the pandemic, FTA and APSA contributed to multiple government initiatives, including the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into the implications of the pandemic. The submission presented on 30 July 2020 addressed critical challenges affecting supply chains and highlighted the measures required to safeguard them.

These advocacy efforts were acknowledged when FTA/APSA representatives were invited to engage with the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry Panel on 15 May 2024. This panel, tasked with evaluating Australia's pandemic response, sought insights from various sectors to strengthen preparedness for future emergencies.

KEY THEMES FROM THE INQUIRY

Discussions during the panel meeting focused on several critical areas for improvement.

Government-industry collaboration: While the relationship between government and industry was generally co-operative, opportunities exist to refine these partnerships for more effective responses in future crises.

Simplified communication channels: Industry feedback underscored the need for a streamlined, single point of contact within government to facilitate more efficient communication during emergencies.

A unified national approach: A cohesive national framework for essential services would help mitigate the challenges created by cross-border inconsistencies in future disruptions.

Seafarer welfare: The panel explored the importance of addressing the health and welfare needs of seafarers, aligning with Australia's obligations under the Maritime Labour Convention 2006.

Clarity in public health orders: Complex and changing public health directives posed significant challenges for businesses and workers. Clear communication of these directives is essential for compliance and continuity.

Understanding supply chains: Greater awareness within government of supply chain dynamics is crucial to avoid unintended disruptions caused by public health measures.

Enhanced crisis planning: Proactive scenario planning and simulation exercises involving government and industry would improve readiness for future emergencies.

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the COVID-19 Response Inquiry Panel, released in October 2024, outline actions and priorities for improving Australia's pandemic preparedness. Among them are measures to strengthen legislative and policy frameworks for international border management and to provide clearer definitions of essential services and workers.

Encouragingly, the report reflects many of the priorities raised by the freight and logistics sector during the pandemic. By incorporating these perspectives, the recommendations offer a pathway toward a more resilient and responsive framework for managing future crises.

LOOKING AHEAD

As Australia prepares for future challenges, there is a clear need for deeper collaboration between government and industry. Enhanced crisis planning, streamlined communication, and a unified national approach will be essential in safeguarding supply chains and ensuring their resilience.

The release of the inquiry's findings marks an important step in this process. While much progress has been made, the work to future-proof Australia's supply chains is ongoing. Engagement with industry stakeholders will be key to achieving meaningful outcomes.

By fostering a culture of preparedness, Australia can better navigate future disruptions, ensuring the freight and logistics sector remains a reliable and essential pillar of the national economy. ■