

Australia's quarantine operations under review

The May Budget provided \$592.8m over five years to strengthen Australia's defences against the introduction of exotic pests and diseases, including foot and mouth disease. How these funds will be spent will be closely monitored by Parliament's Public Accounts and Audit Committee, which has initiated a review of Australia's quarantine operations.

Australia's quarantine function, which will cost almost \$90m this financial year, is delivered by two organisations within the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (AFFA) – the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) and Biosecurity Australia.

Biosecurity Australia develops quarantine policy and advises the Government, while AQIS undertakes actual quarantine operations and ensures compliance with quarantine policy. Also closely involved with protecting our borders is Customs, a big beneficiary of that extra funding (\$238.8 million). Just how well the AFFA agencies coordinate with Customs is to be examined by the Public Accounts and Audit inquiry, which was sparked by a recent Auditor-General's report, and an ongoing interest in border security matters (see story on Coastwatch report, page 4).

The Auditor-General's report (*Audit Report 47, 2000-01, Managing for Quarantine Effectiveness – Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – Australia*) revealed potentially serious shortfalls in Australia's ability to secure its border against pests and diseases.

The Auditor-General estimated that just 11% of seizable materials sent by international mail through Sydney and Melbourne is actually being intercepted.

The almost 90% of items getting through equates to some 170,000 prohibited items entering Australia in the mail. This estimate will be tested by the Committee.

For items carried by international air passengers, the Auditor-General estimated that about half the seizable material (some 300,000 items a year) got past the quarantine barrier. The rates vary between airports, ranging from three-quarters getting through in Cairns to just under a third breaching the border in Adelaide.

The consequences of a failure of quarantine control could be disastrous. You need look no further than foot and mouth disease in Britain. Within Australia, \$123 million is being spent over the next five years to eradicate fire ants. The cost of not successfully controlling this pest – which is thought to have arrived in Australia five years ago in ship's cargo – is estimated at \$6.7 billion over 30 years.

Other diseases with significant potential for serious consequences include fire blight in apples and pears, and Pierce's disease in grapes.

The totality of AQIS's operations will be examined in the Public Accounts and Audit review, including:

- the coordination of AQIS with other border control agencies;
- the identification of potential risks to Australia and the application of resources to meet those risks.;



Photo: Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service

- the impact of international agreements on quarantine activities;
- the operations of AQIS that are beyond Australia's borders;
- AQIS border operations; and
- monitoring and surveillance within Australia for breaches of the quarantine barrier.

The inquiry will also monitor AFFA's implementation of the Auditor-General's recommendations.

Another issue raised by the Auditor-General was that most of Biosecurity's import risk assessments, which cost on average \$400,000, take longer than anticipated, and on occasions have resulted in controversy. There have been two recent parliamentary inquiries sparked by these assessments – one into the importation of Canadian salmon, and the other into the proposed importation of apples from New Zealand. The development of Biosecurity Australia's risk assessment analyses will be examined by the current inquiry.

The 'Review of Australia's Quarantine Function' inquiry is accepting submissions until 2 November. For more information

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