# 2023 National Biosecurity Forum

Event transcript

5 April 2023

Canberra, Australia

## Session 1 – Part 2

Richard Morecroft (continued): And as our panel leaves the stage and just maybe pop your microphones or hand them over as you leave, thank you very much. We are going to welcome immediately another great group of panellists who are going to be exploring biosecurity before the Australian border. So please welcome them as they come up onto the stage.

This panel includes: Tina Hutchison, First Assistant Secretary of the Biosecurity Operations Division in the department; Stuart Anderson, Deputy-Director General, Biosecurity New Zealand, and we are delighted that Stuart is able to join us today; and Sal Milici, General Manager Trade Policy and Operations, Freight and Trade Alliance and the Australian Peak Shippers Association.

And we're going to hear something about recent impacts on biosecurity, changes to offshore activities and what they mean for Australia and [the] world, and perhaps I can kick off before we start getting some questions from the room and elsewhere.

And first of all perhaps to you, Tina, a very simple but big question, what are the benefits of managing biosecurity risks offshore?

Tina Hutchison: Thanks very much, Richard, and thanks very much for the opportunity to talk to you today. For me, there are over 25 million benefits to keeping risks offshore and that's benefits to every single person who lives in Australia. That we've got the benefit of the amenity of our way of life, and we heard a little bit about that from the previous panel, that you're able to move around without the risk of knowing that if you get bitten by a dog in a park, we might have rabies in Australia or if you're bitten by a mosquito, we heard about Japanese encephalitis [virus], we have, we are free of many diseases and pests and the environmental ones of course that you're walking around your beautiful cities or your beautiful rural areas across Australia and your trees are dying and you're unable to access your national parks because they're closed because they're at risk of having myrtle rust or other diseases spread through them. So I think the benefits of keeping risks offshore are almost immeasurable but there's a benefit to every single one of us.

There's then billions of benefit in the money, the financial cost of managing onshore and many people around the room today have been involved in making very difficult decisions about moving money from other pressing issues within Australia to fight disease incursions and outbreaks, they’re costly, they take a long period of time and they’re not always guaranteed to be successful, so I think we've got billions of reasons to keep our risks offshore.

And then we've got some very practical ones because the infrastructure at our borders can only do so much, and we've seen that very recently and people have seen that in the media over the last couple of weeks. If you haven't been directly impacted by it with, between 2001 and 2002, an 88% increase in biosecurity risk material on imported new cars and it has brought the infrastructure to its knees and we've had scores of vessels sitting off the Port of Melbourne or the Port of Port Kembla and it costs tens of thousands of dollars a day for those vessels to sit offshore. And so I think everywhere you look, there's plenty of benefit for all of us who are involved in being Australian, living in Australia, being traders, travellers, consumers, there's plenty of benefit for us and there's also plenty of opportunity for us. So I think that there's a lot for us to consider in that. Thanks very much, Richard.

Richard Morecroft: No, thank you and a great start to our discussion. A reminder again, of course, if you have questions here in the room, do please put up your hand and somebody will bring a microphone over to you, but particularly for our virtual attendees, do please get on that Q&A function and get your questions to us as soon as possible so that we can deal with that very slight time lag and get your questions to the panel.

But Stuart Anderson, maybe I can continue with you just for a moment and again welcome. What engagement does Biosecurity New Zealand have with international importers when developing new import health standards?

Stuart Anderson: Thank you. It's great to be here. Look very similar to I think the way things work here, a lot of our effort is on in offshore so before things actually come here. Despite the most visible part, I think of the biosecurity system being the people in the airports and the ports doing inspections, a huge amount of effort is actually offshore to stop things so that they do come and arrive safely to standard. So what we've been trying to do in that regard is to engage as proactively as we can in right from the outset, with importers, freight forwarders, brokers, shipping companies, etc to deal with that risk offshore and to make sure that when things get to us, they're all compliant and they come through easily, which benefits everyone, of course. So what we've been consciously trying to do with it is move from I think where we probably were, consulting on the import health standards or the requirements done, because it was a requirement we had to consult, and we're done all the work and then we're going to consult on the thing, we've moved to more actually engaging right from the outset and talking about it right from the beginning and getting the input right along the way. That frees up the process at the other end of it if you're getting the things in place. We're fortunate I think, a couple of the mechanisms we hear from the customs brokers, freight forwarders association, we've managed to build a very good, close relationship with them, and it's a good, captive audience in terms of all those main players that we engage with from the outset. We've also established a Plant Germplasm Import Council, which has been running, probably about 3 years or so now. That's been a fantastic initiative, it’s got the main players from industry around the table that are in the importing game in terms of plants and plant material and products as well as not just industry association bodies, but actual businesses as well as sitting around the table with us, with our technical people and taking more strategic approach to actually how we prioritise, how we, how we manage quarantine processes, offshore requirements et cetera. That has been helpful to us. It's established a good relationship, it is working well. We also have a Plant Market Access Council, primarily more focused for our exporters in terms of market access, but the bilateral and the relationship of the trading country there is important. So we've been able to clear through some things there as well.

And I think also the other thing that internally we've put more of a focus on in those engagements is getting our border clearance frontline part of the business engaged in those discussions and processes right from the outset. So we're trying to avoid the great import health standard with all the technical requirements, but our people can't inspect it or actually enforce it because they don't know how it's too complicated. So those are some things that I think like I say, are making a difference and have helped in terms of relationship and getting it right.

Richard Morecroft: And you mentioned that process of bringing in the discussions, the consultations right at the beginning as part of that process. Just briefly, how have you or have you formalised that, structuralised that as part of the process?

Stuart Anderson: I think a couple of those sort of working group committees help with that, agreeing the work program in advance, being open and transparent about that. What we've also done in terms of prioritising our work program with the import health standards is we've got a process now where before we set that, we go out and actually get feedback from industry, from stakeholders, get all their priorities and do some sort of a scoring and ranking of those. So I'm really trying to actually work together from the outset and get everyone around the table, is what we've been trying to do. And like I say, it's helping yeah, it’s certainly helping us.

Richard Morecroft: Thank you again. A reminder, we very much want you to be part of the conversation. Do we have any questions at the moment, please do pop up your hand and a microphone will come your way. Yes, Sir [referencing Michael Cope from the audience]. The microphone is heading your way, right now. Thank you. And of course, while the microphone’s travelling, a reminder to our virtual colleagues, please do send in your questions and I will try and get to them as soon as they do come in. Thank you.

Michael Cope: Thank you. Good morning, Michael Cope, General Manager International at Australia Post. A question I've got regarding bilateral agreements and free trade agreements and how that features in biosecurity strategies and building that into these offshore agreements, so that there can be an intervention that's within the framework, has any work been progressed on that? Or does it already exist?

Richard Morecroft: Who would like to address that?

Stuart Anderson: Yeah. So I can talk from our end. So very much a part of the framing and our thinking in terms of how we progress with those, there are a number of countries where we have either accelerated or emphasised our focus on import health standards to facilitate those bilateral relationships and then facilitate both market exists for our products, but then reciprocate that with the country that we're trying to get better biosecurity standards for ourselves in place, to actually offer something in terms of some of their products coming back. That of course is not always easy. There's a delicate balance with all of that. And it does get quite difficult in terms of prioritising what, where and how you put the effort. There's always a huge, long list of countries that are knocking on the door who want to send things our way and countries that we want to get time for import health standards in place for, as well, and industry has really strong views around all of that as well. So it's very much part of our process.

Richard Morecroft: Yeah, Tina would you like to respond from an Australian perspective? Thanks.

Tina Hutchison: Thanks very much for the question. How I will respond, I haven't been directly involved in our bilateral negotiations, very similar to New Zealand, though it does form part of those discussions and there are others here and including the people who were up previously who'd be able to speak more directly to that. One thing we do do is work on either government to government, government to business, or business to business type of arrangements to try and manage risks offshore. And some of those we do in conjunction with New Zealand as well. So in a very practical sense an example is used cars from Japan, for example, where we've had long term arrangements in place where there's offshore inspection and assurance overseas so that when the vehicles get here they can move through the border and the risk is managed. We've got similar arrangements for dealing with brown marmorated stink bug. We've got other arrangements for container hygiene and cleanliness, where people who are shipping from countries that are on what we call our country action list, that have a high proportion of hitchhiker type pests like giant African snail, they can enter schemes where they make sure that they undertake a whole range of procedures offshore, which enable them to move more easily onshore. So it doesn't go directly to your question in relation to FTA's, but certainly we are very conscious of what is it that we can do formally, informally, and also in recognition of the complexity of supply chains, if there's things that are happening offshore that are going to deal with biosecurity risk, how do we recognise that so that we don't add complications at the border for things that have already been dealt with? Australia Post, and post is particularly difficult as we understand, because of the information available about what's been put in the post and coming towards us, so that brings its own difficulties, but it certainly is on the mind of Australia in a similar way to New Zealand when we're having discussions with our international counterparts.

Richard Morecroft: Thank you. Before we go to our next question in the room, I'd like to bring you in Sal if I may in a very practical way. What solutions are being considered to combat the movement of contaminated sea containers?

Sal Milici: Yeah. Thanks, Richard, and thanks for the opportunity to speak today. It's a global problem and it needs global reform. There's 2 areas that I want to briefly talk about. One is container construction and the other is container data. So container construction, most are still made with timber floors and we know that under the timber floors is a great place for pests to hide and live for extended period of time and the other is data, where's that container been for the last 5 years because pests can live under the floor for up to 5 years? And to bring a, I guess a local flavour to that we had the couple of Khapra beetle outbreaks in Australia a couple of years ago, and that took up to, I think 20,000 hours of the department’s time to track that down and it was found that the traditional risk assessment methods of, are they high risk goods from a high risk country, don't really work because I think it was baby chairs from Italy and fridges from Thailand, you know low risk goods from low risk countries. So, Gabrielle mentioned the convention that's being held in Brisbane around sea container cleanliness. We're going to be presenting at that and we’re I guess currently formulating our position on what global reform should be done. It's really apparent that there will be some global reform on shipping containers. The shipping industry or the container ship industry has started the ball rolling with their proposal, a Verified Pest Protection Declaration, which is an interesting first step. It basically requires all parties in the supply chain to assure that the container has no visible pests. Interestingly the container owners or the shipping lines aren't required to verify that, so we've got some questions about that as a proposal, but it's a good first step.

Richard Morecroft: Great. Thank you very much. Now I know we have a question in the room. So thank you.

Justin Toohey (audience): Thanks Justin Toohey. Dairy. To Sal, not wishing to be provocative here at all, but thought I'd raise the issue of funding. We're all talking about funding and all grappling with how best to deal with it. I know the Craik Review suggested some sort of shipping levy that's well past now and dealt with. Do you see a role for your members in contributing funding either for pre border, border or post border biosecurity activities?

Sal Milici: Yeah, it's a good question and there's two pieces of work underway as we speak, short term, around cost recovery and then there's a broader sustainable funding discussion. Our position is that you know, the import or trade sector does need to pay its way for one of a better word, but it needs to be a nuanced instrument rather than a blunt instrument of just a flat fee. So allow an importer who's got really secure supply chains and can demonstrate that and give them a lower cost recovery as opposed to your first time importer, first time supplier. They both shouldn't be paying the same thing I guess is our position. It needs to be a bit more refined than previous or current proposals.

Richard Morecroft: Great. Thank you very much and again thank you for all the questions both in the room and coming in from our virtual attendees. We've got one of those questions now from a virtual attendee to you, Tina, how is Australia helping the exporting countries with appropriately and efficiently managing Australia's strict biosecurity expectations offshore?

Tina Hutchison: Thanks very much. Great question. So Australia has a network of overseas councillors, so our councillors are in a vast number of really important trading countries for us and they do a couple of really important things. One is engage on Australia's trading environment, so helping with some of the things that Stuart was talking about earlier but also they're there to help take our messages forward, understand what the complexities might be in those countries, help us understand them, and also provide information so we would engage directly with our councillors. We also direct work with peak bodies and with the industry themselves, who reach back into their own supply chains, so we either reach in at a government level. Recently I've met with representatives from the Japanese embassy for example, so we make ourselves available to describe, explain and understand and also help them understand why and how Australia might be different to experiences they have when they're moving around countries elsewhere. So we, I think we heard Brant talk earlier about communication and we don't rely on just one mechanism, we rely on a whole range of mechanisms, but importantly understanding what the challenges are from their point of view and how confusing looking into Australia and our regulations are and equally, like Stuart, we understand that it's not easy to pick your way through the import process for Australia. So as we continue to focus on increasing digitisation, increasing ability to communicate more easily, how can we streamline and improve but also get ahead of the game and recognise information held in supply chains and use that rather than having people fill out forms. So a whole range of ways, but we certainly do take it seriously and focus on it because the more people can understand, the better able they are to comply.

Richard Morecroft: Sal, you want to follow up on that?

Sal Milici: Yeah. Just want to jump in and mention that Dr Locke mentioned that your team has looked at 6 million documents. I think last year and if things continue, it will be 8 million soon. And I don’t think we can just keep adding more people behind screens and analysing those documents. There needs to be some sort of reform around what biosecurity security are we getting from looking at this document or are we just looking at it because we’ve always looked at it?

Richard Morecroft: Okay. Thank you very much. We have questions in the room. Thank you, Sir. Yeah.

Paul Damkjaer (audience): Paul Damkjaer, CEO of International Forwarders and Customs Brokers Association of Australia. This is for Sal, Sal in the last couple of weeks, there's been a lot of talk about the funding models that the department is looking at and some of the problems that are facing. Now with the funding, how is this going to help the service standards that the importers are receiving or will receive in the future?

Sal Milici: It's a great question and I think there does need to be some sort of alignment between a service standard and paying for service. We did some work with a submission for the Productivity Commission, and we came up with a figure of about $500 million that Australian importers are paying to overseas shipping lines for container detention, so returning that shipping container late and it was it was quite apparent that a huge proportion that is due to delays in biosecurity processing over the over the last couple of years. So whilst we always support the protection of our borders, the costs to the importing community which flow through to the whole community are huge.

To your question about service standards, around document assessment for example, there is a service standard of, I think it's 80% being assessed within 48 business hours. We question about, that's been in place a long time. When was it last reviewed? It'd be great for that to be reviewed and perhaps that 48 hours doesn't align with international business practices because the planes don't stop and the ships don't stop if it's not a business hour.

Richard Morecroft: Okay. Thank you very much. Yes, we have another question straight away on the floor.

Andrew Cox (audience): Yeah. Thanks, Andrew Cox, Invasive Species Council, my question’s about culture and I'm thinking about a lot of the importers actually want to do the right thing, but it's t's about how to support them better and to make sure those who aren't doing the right thing, dodging the rules or trying to save funds, how we build their compliance and buy in. Probably interested in listening to Stuart what he thinks because in New Zealand I get the impression there's a stronger biosecurity culture and we're quite envious of it. Tell me if I'm wrong and I'd be interested here from Sal about how we build culture in the whole sector.

Stuart Anderson: Thank you. Look great, great question so I mean I think the comment that was made earlier, there's no way we can inspect and look at every single thing. So we don't and we can't and it does rely on businesses and operators doing the right thing which comes to a good culture and engagement, et cetera. So I think a few things that we've done in that space and I think the observation is correct as well that overwhelmingly most operators all do do the right thing and they want to do the right thing and there's always the small number that don't. I'll talk a little bit about it later this afternoon, we've heard an initiative in New Zealand that we've supported, but it's being run by industry now, the business pledge, which brings businesses from across the biosecurity system together in the sign up and commit to proper and good biosecurity practices. That has really helped in the importer space, I think that has made quite a big difference but recently as well in the last year or 18 months or so, what we've done in the importing path at the cargo pathway is we've shifted to a performance-based verification model. So everyone still pays the fee, but instead of what was before, a more randomised approach to our inspection and auditing, we're basing it now on performance so essentially if you're a good operator and you've got a good compliance track record and your people are all trained and current and all the rest and you can demonstrate all that, you will be visited less frequently by us and we will have more confidence that the operation is being run properly from a biosecurity point of view. Conversely, those that don't perform well will receive more visits from us and there will be various thresholds which infringements can apply or their authorisation to operate, what we call a transitional facility, could be suspended. So we're in the process of rolling that out, it's going really. We are actually finding a good level of compliance with that audit approach and we've had really good feedback. We've had really good feedback from industry on that approach and they have been very receptive to that scheme.

Richard Morecroft: Thank you very much. And that sense of buy in, that sense of collaboration, that sense of cooperation is a great place, I think, to conclude this very interesting panel discussion. So would you please thank our panellists for this session today. Thank you.

[MORNING TEA]

Richard Morecroft: Well, ladies and gentlemen, welcome back. Once again a very warm welcome after a delicious morning tea and the opportunity to catch up with colleagues. But we're getting back into action for what I said was a very full and a very rich program for the rest of the day. And particularly now it gives me great pleasure to introduce the honourable Senator Murray Watt, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and, of course, Minister for Emergency Management. So please welcome the Minister to address the forum. Thank you.

Minister Murray Watt: Thanks very much again, Richard, you did a wonderful job last night and looks like and I'm hearing that you've done the same again today, so thank you for facilitating today’s sessions. Good morning, everyone. It's a real pleasure to be back with you. I think most of the people in the room were at the awards ceremony last night. And can I congratulate again all of the award winners. It was truly inspiring to meet and hear from a number of people, whether it be farmers, scientists, researchers, policymakers, community members, everyone who's been contributing to the world of biosecurity and it was terrific that we all got the opportunity, I think, to recognise some outstanding performers last night. I would of course like to start by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land that we're gathering on today, the none of all people, their Elders, past present and emerging. And I'd like to reiterate our governments’ commitment to the Uluru statement from the heart and to recognising our first peoples in our Constitution through a Voice to Parliament.

And as I say, can congratulations again to last night's award winners. As I was saying last night, I think that all of us who are at this forum share a common understanding that biosecurity is vital for Australia. And what I'd like to do in this presentation is just talk to you a little bit about my perspectives and the government's perspectives on the role of biosecurity in our country, what we've been seeking to do since the election about 10 months ago, and some things about future directions and where we might be heading when it comes to biosecurity as well. So as I say, all of you know how vital biosecurity is to our country, it's vital for our agriculture sector, it's vital for our natural environment, it's vital for our international trade, it's vital for our Australian way of life and of critical importance at the moment, biosecurity is also vital to consumers given any threat to our food supply has a direct impact on the rising cost of living.

So it is something that I think everyone in Australia has an interest in and as has no doubt been said many times, and I said last night, it really is a truism that biosecurity is a shared responsibility because it does connect and influence all of our lives and for that reason, everyone has a role to play in protecting and improving Australia's biosecurity system. It is a shared responsibility, whether you're a returning traveller, discarding or declaring risk items, a business owner looking to import goods into the country, a farmer with a risk management plan for your property, a scientist doing research or a government putting risk management systems in place. Everyone in this country has to contribute to the biosecurity cause. And I think today's forum provides an opportunity for all of us to strengthen ties between governments, industry and the broader community and it's an important opportunity for us to discuss both the risks and the opportunities ahead of us.

While I think all of us can be proud of the fact that our biosecurity system has, for the most part served us very well up until now, and it is worth noting that Australia remains free of the type of large scale biosecurity outbreak that would bring industry to its knees, the truth is that over the last few years, despite all of that we have started to see some cracks in our national biosecurity wall. Previous outbreaks over the last few years, such as white spot disease in prawns, which unfortunately is back in northern New South Wales at the moment, Panama disease in bananas in far North Queensland and tomato potato psyllid in Perth, among others, have had significant impacts on our seafood and horticulture industries. And all of know that these biosecurity risks that we face are growing and they're increasing in complexity, driven by factors such as climate change, increasing trade and travel, and changes in land use. And that's why we need, as a country a biosecurity system that keeps pace with today's needs and prepares for the threats of tomorrow. What we need is a strong, smart and sustainable biosecurity system that is supported by people across the country because that helps us to manage growing biosecurity risks and protects Australia's multibillion dollar agriculture sector among the other industries. The benefits of this touch everyone. And that's why from the day we came to office, about 10 months ago, the Albanese government has made strengthening our biosecurity system one of our top priorities, and I guess that's not surprising considering that it was in my 5th week as Minister that we were notified that foot-and-mouth disease had spread to Bali, having reached Indonesia before the election, along with lumpy skin disease. And I know from Mark Schipp that there’s an update on the FMD situation in Indonesia as recently as today. So in the early months because of all of that, we focused our efforts on improving our protections, our preparedness and our response capability in light of those outbreaks. And since then we’ve continued to build our protections against emerging threats to our agriculture sector. That’s why in the October budget last year, we’ve invested $134 million in new biosecurity measures, like extra frontline staff, 20 new detector dogs and stronger defences against foot-and-mouth disease and other emerging threats.

We've also passed legislation to strengthen the penalties for those people who are caught wilfully trying to circumvent our strong biosecurity laws. When the threat of FMD and LSD first emerged, you might have heard me talk about the fact that we were taking a three-pronged approach to deal with those threats. Firstly, assisting our international neighbours. Secondly shoring up our protections here in Australia, particularly at our borders, and thirdly, doing a health check on our ability to deal with an outbreak if it did get to Australia and as a result of that, we followed through with different actions under each of those 3 prongs.

We've provided a range of international support particularly to Indonesia, Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea, including 4 million doses of foot-and mouth-disease vaccine and over 400,000 doses of LSD vaccines with another 1,000,000 recently committed. We've provided technical assistance and operational inputs to these nations through things such as rapid risk assessments, active and passive surveillance, diagnostic testing capability and vaccine preparedness.

At our border, we've reviewed our import permits and risk management measures for incoming air and sea passengers, imported cargo and mail items and returning livestock vessels. We've deployed those sanitation foot mats that probably many of you have walked over, I certainly have myself in international airports, and just last week, the one millionth passenger returning from Indonesia passed over those foot mats. Our launch last year of the National Lumpy Skin Disease Action Plan, which was developed with industry, the states and territories has unified us all in these efforts. We remain vigilant and we continue to work collectively with industry farmers, research organisations, the community, states and territories and our regional partners, to keep our border protections strong and to improve our readiness for any response that might be required. I also set up a joint interagency task force between the Department of Agriculture and the National Emergency Management Agency, one of many occasions where it's been kind of useful to have the Minister for Agriculture also being the Minister for Emergency Management, given all the floods we've had as well. And that task force was set up to assess and test our biosecurity security systems, should the unthinkable happen and an outbreak occur here.

Now, the first quarterly progress report on the recommendations of the task force was released by the department earlier today and that highlights the breadth of work that is being undertaken in this space to make sure that we are fully prepared if an outbreak does occur here. So now priority is being placed on the recommendations and associated activities that will ensure both the department and our national biosecurity system are well placed to effectively respond to and recover from a significant emergency animal disease incursion.

Don't worry, I'm not only going to talk about animals because I know there's a lot of plant diseases as well. And today, I'm also pleased to release the second annual action plan to support the Commonwealth Biosecurity 2030 strategy to help us build a stronger, more collaborative and smarter biosecurity system. If you have a chance to look at that action plan that we’re releasing today, you'll see that it reports progress on some important priorities, including a successful collaboration with the Indigenous Land and Sea Rangers for monitoring mosquito vectors of human and animal diseases, the implementation of new technologies such as high throughput sequencing to efficiently test for exotic plant viruses in post entry quarantine and engaging with industry to trial end to end import supply chain solutions to transform how biosecurity outcomes are achieved.

So as you can see, that long list shows you that there's a lot been happening to strengthen our biosecurity system in partnership with states and territories, the wider community and industry in the 10 months that we've been in office, but despite all of those improvements, it is clear to me, and I'm sure it's very clear to you, that our biosecurity system is under more strain than ever before. Anyone who saw the news earlier this week, and I referred to this last night, of the 38-tonne haul of illegally imported meat and plant products, one of the biggest seizures of biosecurity risk material in our country's history, would understand the size of the task for our nation's biosecurity officers. Or the explosion in contaminated cars that are arriving at our ports with unwelcome passengers like the brown marmorated stink bug, exotic snails and Siam weed, things that would destroy our horticulture sector if they were to get in. So whether it's at our airports, our seaports or our mail centres, the risk of a biosecurity incursion is growing as external factors, like, as I say, climate change, new trade pathways, and increased international movements become more prevalent.

So of course, as the risk grows, so too does the cost of keeping out these exotic pests and diseases and just as upholding our biosecurity is a shared responsibility, so too is funding our biosecurity system. This shared funding responsibility has been a long-standing practice between government, industry and the wider public, but unfortunately over the last few years, the truth is that the way in which we fund our biosecurity system has not kept pace with these growing threats and costs. And you may have read a bit about this in the media lately, particularly in relation to the department's budget. The truth is that cost recovery settings for biosecurity operations have not been properly reviewed in this country since 2015 and that's resulted in budget deficits for the department in 3 of the past 4 years. Rather than passing on increasing costs to industry, as has traditionally occurred under the Australian Government charging framework and as recommended by the 2017 Craik Review, the reality is that the former government plundered departmental cash reserves and ran up deficits that were hidden within larger departmental structures. And as a result, that the Department of Agriculture has needed to fund the shortfall in cost recovery totalling more than $100 million in recent years and that's money that could have gone to improving our biosecurity system rather than simply doing the basics.

Now, of course, apart from the cost recovery issues, you would all be aware, and I think it's been a matter of discussion today, that Australia has never really had a sustainable biosecurity funding model. And that's despite it being recommended to the previous government in several reviews and reports, and it continually having been asked for by a range of industry leaders, including the National Farmers Federation. Short term, temporary and terminating funding measures became the order of the day rather than sustainable, ongoing funding year to year. And what that has meant is that staff at our department have continually been asked to do more with less, particularly in relation to biosecurity. Now I think you'll agree that they've done a terrific job in keeping Australia safe from exotic pests and diseases, but they do need help to do their job. Now I think there will always be a place for surge funding to be provided by governments when events occur or appear likely, but clearly, we need to lock in a more sustainable way of funding our biosecurity system with predictable funding from year to year, rather than continue relying on the temporary funding injections that we have seen over the past few years. At the same time, we do need to lock in a fair system of how we pay for our biosecurity system, a funding system that shares the cost between taxpayers, risk creators, and the beneficiaries of the system. I think that's fair and reasonable to have such a system in place because biosecurity and how we pay for it, after all, is a shared responsibility that all of us have an interest in keeping strong. And it's because of those concerns about sustainable biosecurity funding that at the last election, our government made a commitment to implement a sustainable biosecurity funding model, and that's something that we've been working on over the last few months in consultation with industry.

The $134 million of biosecurity commitments that I mentioned we made in the October budget, just 5 months after we were elected, I saw that as a down payment on a long-term sustainable funding method. It wasn't always going to be able to do the job on its own, but it was a good start while we worked on that broader policy. That was a significant investment that allowed us time to continue the consultation process on how a sustainable funding model might work. And through that process, we've heard from a wide range of stakeholders, everyone from Qantas to the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council and everyone in between and likely we've heard from many of you who are here today on this subject as well. And we've really welcomed the feedback that we've received on the discussion paper that was circulated by the department and what that showed to me and the range of different views that we received, and different stakeholders, was again a reminder that our biosecurity system touches an incredibly wide section of our society. And that is exactly why it's vital that we get this funding model right because it will benefit so many different people and parts of our economy, not only protecting our $90 billion agriculture sector, but also protecting our reputation as a clean, green trading partner across the globe. It needs to be something that we are all invested in from those who create the risk to those who benefit from the risk being mitigated, and of course, the wider Australian community.

So just to wrap up again, could I just say that I think our biosecurity system is something that all Australians should be really proud of and I do want to thank each and every one of you for the role that you play, wherever you come from, whatever part of the community, in helping keep that system strong. It's a real national success that we should all be proud of. The diligence and discipline shown by everyone in protecting us from exotic pests and diseases deserves to be recognised and applauded. So I do hope that you're all taking the opportunity to give yourselves a pat on the back to today. And that's not to mention, of course, the stellar work of our departmental and biosecurity officers each and every single day in identifying and managing potential risks. They often don't get enough appreciation for their work and I really do want to, as Minister, recognise the work of the departmental and biosecurity officers at whatever level they come from. I'm really pleased to say that just as you're committed to dealing with these issues, I can assure you that in the Albanese government, your efforts are now being matched with proper national leadership that takes these issues seriously and that understands that we do need to move towards a sustainable biosecurity funding model. Despite all that, of course, we can't take our eye off the ball with such massive threats on our doorstep. We continue to have foot-and-mouth disease and lumpy skin disease in Indonesia along with dozens of other countries. African swine fever is spreading across the world, hello Margo [referring to Margo Andrae from Australian Pork Limited in the audience], can't forget ASF. Not to mention *Xylella* and other assorted plant diseases that would prove incredibly costly to our industries here. We must do everything in our power to ensure that our biosecurity system is brought back up to speed and then strengthened to deal with any future threats. The Albanese government takes our obligations to the Australian people and the industry very seriously, as well as our commitment to the farmers, the workers and processes that I represent in this portfolio. As a government, I think we have an opportunity to do something that has never been achieved, providing long term certainty for our biosecurity system. I'm advocating for a very strongly through a very difficult budget round, we know money is tight, but I'm advocating very strongly for it because I know it's important and I feel that I've got the support of my colleagues and they understand the importance of it as well. And I hope that all of you will join us in continuing this work in genuine partnership and collaboration as we walk down that road together. Thank you for the opportunity to have a chat with you and best of luck for the rest of the day. Thanks.

Richard Morecroft: So thank you very much indeed, Minister. Very much appreciated and thank you for sharing that vision, amongst other things for sustainable biosecurity funding and also good to hear about our very broadly positive biosecurity status in this country. But also of course to hear of the urgent response, the ongoing response, to FMD and other potential outbreaks or bio-invasions. And in actual fact mentioning as the Minister did, and as I have just done now, foot-and-mouth disease, we're going to move immediately onto our next panel, which will explore a national response to foot-and-mouth disease. So I'd like to invite the following panellists to the stage: Dr Brant Smith, welcome back to the stage, acting First Assistant Secretary, Animal Division from the department; Justin Toohey, Advisor on Animal Health, Welfare and Biosecurity, Australian Dairy Farmers, and thank you for your contributing questions also thus far; and Nathan Rhodes Executive Director, Biosecurity from the Department of Primary Industries and Regions in South Australia.

This panel is going to touch on the spread of FMD around the world and how we're preparing, given its rapid approach towards Australia, as again we just heard the Minister mention. Once again, it's an opportunity to ask the experts and questions on the topic, whether you're here in the room but especially if you're part of our virtual audience, our virtual delegates, then please do get into Q&A mode and send us those questions as soon as you possibly can. But perhaps I can just get the ball rolling. So we begin with Justin Toohey, from your recent experiences, what do you see is the most challenging aspects of biosecurity for the livestock sector?

Justin Toohey: Thanks Richard. So, I'd like to preamble by saying that I'm here for dairy, but I've had some experience across a number of livestock sectors. I have nothing in terms of experience with plants, so I'll talk specifically about livestock and more particularly the dairy sector. The livestock sector has varied quite significantly in their capacity to prepare for an EAD (emergency animal disease) incursion. The intensive industries of course, are, they're not FMD related. Let me just talk generally about EADs, they're very well prepared in many respects, so got huge businesses that rely on good preparation. And I think the peak bodies have done a power of work along with governments to help those intensive industries prepare well. There are still pockets of shadow areas where there's small farms or peri-urban areas where you hold a few chooks or a sheep or a pig or something that are really high risk and we have to deal with those.

The extensive industries are a little different, but the dairy one particularly has some unique challenges, that confronted, particularly in relation to something like foot-and-mouth disease and one of the particular areas there is raising the awareness at grass roots level, at ground level. We have to raise the awareness of farmers around what they can do to contribute to preparedness. Everyone in this room knows what biosecurity is but I've heard it said recently that farmers generally, and the community generally, knows what quarantine is but doesn't know what biosecurity is. It's this new buzzword and people don't quite understand it. And of course, they don't equal each other, biosecurity covers a whole range of issues, including not only disease preparedness, diseases as such but also antimicrobial resistance, hygiene issues and we've seen that in Covid, that's certainly a biosecurity issue, and very particular for dairy farms, food safety, I think pathogens, pathogen control, food poisoning, these are biosecurity issues, so much broader than quarantine.

And our challenge is to let the farmers what their role is in managing that, and playing their part which includes, which includes funding and I’ll come to that, that's perhaps another question. But just in my personal experience we had, when I worked for the cattle sector, a network of biosecurity officers around the country, not a huge number of people, but we put it together as a livestock biosecurity network. It's now defunct because of funding. But we found that what was the real advantage of that was how the [inaudible] officers could relate to the farmers. And they went around the country doing face to face kind of interactions on workshops and so on. They actually had a higher social media presence than some of the RDC's [Research and Development corporations] and they're only about 5 or 6 staff, so they've really had tremendous impact. And to me while most sectors, including the dairy sector, do have networks of extension officers, we need to bolster that area for quite significantly. We talked yesterday and it was setting in this morning about passive surveillance, perhaps using voluntary people, we have over 100,000 livestock producers, well over 100,000 livestock producers who are themselves surveyors of the health of their animals. So in a sense, they're kind of a volunteer surveillance network. But it's somewhat dormant in terms of our biosecurity preparedness, because they don't quite understand sometimes the impact that they can have and I think it's our job to awaken that dormancy, and with that, I think we need funding. Again, it was said last night, at the awards, I think Kylie mentioned how you don't necessarily need funding to get on with this stuff, and that's true, but additional funding would be hugely beneficial for us to get people on the ground and overcome this, what is essentially a market failure issue and that is to get dairy farmers thinking about their biosecurity.

And I'd just like to wait make one more particular point specific to dairy farms and FMD. There is an unacceptably high level of dairy farms who allow tankers to run down their tracks once a day, once every two days to collect milk with the same tracks having some sort of pollutant, effluent pollutant, there from the cows or vehicles farm vehicles, you know this is quite unacceptable. And to me, it's a game breaker in terms of our preparedness for foot-and-mouth disease because if we get an outbreak in this country and then we get to the point of zoning, which is stage two of the response, tankers may not want to go onto those properties to collect milk because of that potential contamination of their wheels.

So we have to think about that as an industry. How do we reach, right back to the farmers and get each one of them to improve their on farm biosecurity practices in that regard, and also to consider their role in having to wash the wheels of the tankers every time they come on to the farm and off the farm and not just tankers, but every vehicle, and when you got B-doubles coming on at 2:00 AM, it's not a pleasant thought to be down there washing wheels of tankers.

Richard Morecroft: That's a, it's a very it's a very practical example and thank you very much indeed for bringing that through our attention, from the broad questions to the very specific ones. Again urging some of our delegates online to submit your questions. We've got one of them now and great Nathan Rhodes that you could join us from South Australia. The question is to you, what are state jurisdictions doing in response to the heightened risk of emergency animal disease incursions in Australia?

Nathan Rhodes: Thanks, Richard. I think one of the most important things that states are doing right now is working together on what a response should look like. Obviously, the way the system is set up is that each state is responsible for its own patch and own area. But right from the start, when FMD became a heightened risk, all the states have pulled together, and led by the Commonwealth and the Lumpy Skin [Disease] Action Plan was a really good example, we have really started working on what our national response would look like to ensure we all know what each jurisdiction will do when the balloon goes up on foot-and-mouth disease. Now we have existing structures in place. We have our vet plans and plant plans and all those sorts of things that we use to respond into in exotic disease emergency, but they are quite high level and now we're looking at exactly what the detail of those responses need to be and what the scenarios will be of an incursion to work out exactly where we need to put our relatively limited resources and when. That’s a really significant piece of work that has taking quite a lot of time and quite a lot of engagement with industry because as we've heard, we can't do this without industry. There are things that only governments can do, but there are also things that only industries can do as well and industry has as much part to play in being prepared and helping manage the disease when it gets here, so that governments can play our part in hopefully eradicating something like foot-and-mouth disease from Australia. All jurisdictions at the moment are looking at the powers that we have to respond, fair to say we all have different pieces of biosecurity legislation in each of the states, but almost without exception at this point in time, all jurisdictions are looking at those pieces of legislation and really questioning whether the powers are there that will be needed in the event of a response.

In South Australia, we've just strengthened the powers in our Livestock Act to the extent that it is now the second most powerful piece of legislation we have at a state level, it's [inaudible] only by the Emergency Management Act and Emergency Management Declaration and we are building a Biosecurity Act that will build those powers in as well. All other states are either reviewing biosecurity acts or developing biosecurity acts so we know what powers we have and that are adequate for what we might need to do to respond.

Richard Morecroft: So yeah, thank you that. And jumping off that to you, Dr Smith, what advice do you think industry groups should be providing to their members to make sure that as a nation, we are prepared as possible for a potential FMD outbreak?

Dr Brant Smith: Thank you. It's an excellent question because there's some people have said today there is a bit of a belief that the government has all the answers and we certainly do not. We have very good processes in place, we undertake really robust risk assessments, we do a whole lot of fantastic work, but that would never be enough in and of itself. The strength of the system is in the sum of its parts, so the Commonwealth has a lead role around coordination, trade, biosecurity, border, pre-border, that sort of work, and that's incredibly important. The states have a really important role because at the end of the day, they are the ones that are dealing with things as and when they happen in their own jurisdictions and industry are also really critical too. And why I say that is because we can put those measures in place, we can use legislation and powers and in the event of an FMD outbreak that would be quite blunt, but the power of industry is how well they can respond, how well they can coordinate, how well they can bring their members together in a way that ensures the viability of those industries in the event of an outbreak. So I can't stress enough how important it is in peacetime to do the work, to have the discussions, not just at the industry level, but right down to the producer level because I still think there's a gap with the farmers on the ground about what they should or shouldn't do. We've got emergency hotlines, we've got those numbers, we talk about them a lot, but that's the sort of messaging that we need people to be thinking about now and testing their plans and systems ahead of time and to see what they will look like and revise them and keep them current as we go forward.

Richard Morecroft: Thank you very much. And we have a question in the room. Thank you, Sir [referencing Mike Darby in the audience].

Mike Darby: Thank you, Mike Darby, Cattle Australia, I'm happy to hear the comments about peace time. It's something that's occupying our mind space at the moment. Obviously we've focused on our biosecurity systems and our response planning but our response planning is largely retroactive, in that it starts after we have an incursion. There's a whole set of pre incursion work that would need to be done after an incursion anyway that we could start on right now and that includes feral animal control and big improvements to movement control et cetera, et cetera. Happy to hear any comments you’ve got around how we could action that and how it doesn’t fall through the cracks and how it might be funded, Justin?

Justin Toohey: Thanks Mike. [Inaudible]. I can’t talk a lot on feral animals, but obviously it’s part of an overall strategy that we need to develop together and fund together, and I appreciate your intro to the funding issue because it’s something that that’s bothered me for the 30 years I’ve been involved in this sector, this sort of area of work, and can’t quite crack it, and I think every meeting we go to, including this workshop today, we’ve talked about needing more funding. The minister hinted at a sustainable funding model, I suspect, and I suspect that’s very heavily government oriented obviously, so what does industry do in recognising its responsibility for providing additional funding? I think right now industries’ funding is essentially through the RDC’s, it’s kind of, I shouldn’t say, piecemeal, that's belittling it, but it's targeted, very targeted, but we don't really know what the left hand is doing the right hand and so on. So it's a bit hard to know in aggregate what we're spending on biosecurity at the industry level and the sorts of things you raise, Mike, that cut across all sectors. Are we maximising our cross sectoral efforts?

My view and the dairy sector, I can actually talk now in Australian dairy farmers policy on this. Last year, it decided that it would support going to its members and asking for a biosecurity levy. Now that sounds all a bit ho-hum, but we actually have a levy in place right now across every single livestock, major livestock, sector in this country and I think most of the plant sectors as well and it's called the emergency response levy. It’s set at zero, and the purpose at levy sitting there, it's been there for 10 or 15 years, is to activate it after an incursion so we can repay the federal government for our share of the response. It's a very simple mechanism. It's all set there and the legislation is there. If you read the detail of the that legislation, it actually allows you to raise the levy above zero for proactive purposes, and nobody's doing that. In the livestock sector, the poultry sector, I think has activated it for repaying the government after AI [Avian influenza], I think prawns as well after white spot might have activated and be paying some money in to the federal government as well and yet nobody out there yet has activated for proactive purposes. And to me, it's a sitter, it's a bit of a no brainer, it's a very simple mechanism. It's something we've already discussed with DAFF and have been told, as you know, my original thought was we're going to have to change the legislation quite a bit, but I was informed by DAFF you just have to change the word zero to a number, so it's as simple as that. The difficult bit is of course convincing our members of, the dairy farmers, that it's worth funding. So we have to put up a good argument for that. They're already paying levies. The dairy levy in fact was reviewed last year, I think and rejected for an increase, the proposed was rejected. So it's not going to be an easy sell, but at this time with FMD just on our border, LSD up there, the dairy sector being heightened in awareness around those exotic diseases. Except for the flood victims who are struggling, no doubt at the moment, there is reasonable money and dairy, and it's now a good time to strike. So to answer your question, Mike, I think there is a way forward, but it'd be nice if all the livestock sectors pulled together on that one.

Richard Morecroft: Thank you very much. Look, we have a huge number of potential questions and areas to look at through today and obviously with this very significant topic as well. But our time is very much tightly allocated, so we're going to have to take just one last question, an online question, Nathan again to you, but just very, briefly if you could please, are there any strategies in place for connecting with peri-urban or small landholders with a couple of animals and educating them on emergency animal diseases?

Nathan Rhodes: Yeah, thank you. It's an interesting question and it's one that comes up a little bit because I'm one of those high-risk peri-urban people, much to the dismay of my staff, that had small land holdings and perhaps not ideal practices. I'd like to think I'm a little better than others. Look, yes, there are. I mean, we engage broadly through the community on all of these biosecurity issues. We have a really good network or landscape boards in South Australia, too, that we have a lot of people that are on the ground and engaging directly with the community on a whole host of things and past animal control is one and their extension in the biosecurity side of things is something that we're working on with them. We also have network of regional staff as well that we have out in and about the regions that engage with the community and do communicate those messages amongst the various community groups.

Richard Morecroft: Good to hear. Thank you very much indeed and as I say, there's so much more that we could discuss on this topic. Hopefully you will continue some of those discussions over lunch and with your colleagues in other spaces, but for now, please would you thank our panel now.