



Mr Ian Callinan AC
Commissioner,
Equine Influenza Inquiry

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This submission consists of some reflections that I hope will be helpful to the Inquiry.

By way of background:

- I am a former AQIS SES officer who took early retirement from AQIS in March 1996 having served pretty much the whole period from my appointment as an SES Officer in 1982 in AQIS and predecessor Ministry of Agriculture export inspection organisations. I am not a scientist but an economist by training;
- I was appointed an SES officer in 1982 as part of a small team charged with the responsibility of re-establishing Australia's reputation as an exporter of wholesome meat to the United States market. This followed the kangaroo and horsemeat substitution incidents and the subsequent Royal Commission into the Australian Meat Industry. I appeared on two occasions before this Royal Commission the second time in front of my then Minister Hon. Peter Nixon;
- In 1990 I was appointed Head of Australia's animal and plant quarantine service. At the time the Quarantine Division which I headed was responsible for both policy and operations, that is it encompassed the responsibilities of the current Biosecurity Australia (BA) organisation, quarantine operations, horticulture and grain export inspection certification and live animal export inspection and certification. The responsibilities and pressure of the position I and my senior officers held was enormous;
- Following my retirement I have established a successful consulting business specialising in institutional arrangements related to quarantine and food safety. In recent years my work has largely been in developing countries, and I have worked in forty developing countries over the past eleven years;
- I have undertaken projects for AQIS, the last substantive one being a review of aircraft waste disposal in 1998 where I headed a team of scientists. I still have some contact with AQIS, perhaps I call in three times a year, largely to say hello to former colleagues. I should not be regarded as an expert in relation to how current structural arrangements have worked or otherwise.

For my part, other than reading press reports and glancing at a few transcripts, I have not sought or received substantive advice from anyone in relation to the matters you have been asked to inquire into.

The following are reflections directed towards the terms of reference of the Commission.

The circumstances that have contributed to the outbreak of equine influenza in Australia;

Whilst you may find that there have been breakdowns in established procedures by AQIS staff, the reality is that there are a number of other issues that have contributed to this outbreak. These include:

- Many AQIS and BA staff work under enormous pressure. The pun of being in a pond full of alligators is quite apt in my experience, and it can be very difficult to focus on other issues that may need addressing;
- There is the constant pressure associated with what are known as business plans, annual reports, human resource strategies, budget estimates, Senate Estimates hearings and the like. Some are statutory requirements; others can (unfortunately) be just regarded as a fact of life. In my experience Senate Estimates hearings can be a genuine part of the budget process. However, on other occasions I have experienced a misuse of powers by some hearings that in reality can only be described as political witch hunts. When in theory a public servant has only about 220 working days in a year all of the above soak up valuable time. I can attest to wasting many valuable hours on the above matters;
- Regular reviews of one sort or another also soak up substantial resources. Some may have followed a specific incident such as the one you have been asked to inquire into, and I cannot argue against the need for an inquiry such as yours. However, some reviews perhaps including some Senate reviews, will be the result of overt and covert political pressure from an industry with a specific aim of delaying the finalisation of an import risk analysis process that is likely to have a negative impact on their industry;
- There are budgetary constraints as there is with all functions of Government. However, at times there are genuine reasons for restraint; on other occasions the underlying reasons may reflect more the Government of the day's wish to stay in power and the building of a funding war chest to facilitate that aim. If a Government is overly harsh in budgetary terms on an agency such as AQIS or BA does it not bear some of the responsibility when situations like the one you are inquiring into occur?

- I have a lot of sympathy with regionally based staff, as too often they do feel isolated from their Central Office colleagues. This is not a new problem but it is one that is very difficult to solve;
- In working directly to eight Federal Ministers from 1982 to 1994, I found some to be much more aware and concerned about the real capacity of AQIS to maintain an appropriate degree of quarantine security. Some were infinitely more concerned with minimising criticism that might be directed towards them (and their Government). The taking of (politically) contentious decisions in relation to import applications from other countries is a very good example of where political influence can be brought to bear often out of the public eye. I recognise that Australia is not alone in the area of taking difficult decisions, where these decisions relate to the import of agricultural products. Perhaps in the years ahead the WTO disputes process will assist in sorting out some of these issues for Governments;
- In my experience AQIS staff handles imports of live animals carefully and your inquiry will more than likely identify the cause of the equine influenza outbreak into Australia. On the other hand I have noted a huge increase in AQIS staff at airports since my retirement, and do reflect whether commensurate effort is being put into the inspection and control of cargo. My belief is that passenger screening is relatively easy compared to cargo screening. I think the question can be legitimately posed as to whether more resources should be directed towards building BA / AQIS scientific resources at a cost to operational resources, in particular airport screening;

The need for any strengthened biosecurity procedures for quarantine management of imported horses.

- Maintaining and updating ICON, the database of conditions of entry and related BA protocols involves an enormous effort. In my experience, resources (particularly scientific) both human and financial are grossly insufficient for this task to be undertaken in a structured (risk based) manner. New conditions for imports are constantly being developed and invariably a degree of priority is ascribed to this function. However, the reviewing of risk and updating of existing conditions tend to be lesser priorities as less pressure is apparent for these functions to be undertaken;
- I have not visited Eastern Creek for over 12 years but looking the television footage the facilities for horses do not appear to have changed dramatically in that period. Intuitively there does seem to be a risk from the transmission of aerosol borne diseases. Perhaps new high security facilities are warranted for horses; but who will bear the capital cost? There is a strong case for the industry bearing the cost where an identifiable beneficiary exists, and this will be the case with most if not all horse imports. Cost recovery by Government is a fact of life for many and quarantine activities are no exception;

