

NOVEL CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

AUSTRALIA'S RESPONSE

27 May 2020

The Australian Border Force (ABF) is taking action to maintain vital international links, protect our citizens and visitors and support the needs of our community in response to the challenge of COVID-19.

Sustaining legitimate international supply chains and global trade will be critical over the coming months. Australia recognises that all WCO members rely on international trade in our supply chains for essential goods, including in sourcing medical and protective products. It is important that the customs measures that WCO members may implement in response to COVID-19 do not unduly or unintentionally disrupt these vital international trade links.

This document provides an overview of the ABF organisational response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Travel restrictions

Australia's border measures are reducing the risk of COVID-19 spread from international travel.

Since 20 March 2020, when Australia restricted passenger arrivals, total air arrivals into Australia have decreased by approximately 99 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. Departures have also decreased significantly, by approximately 89 per cent since restrictions on departures from Australia came into effect on 26 March 2020.

Quarantine takes place immediately in the State or Territory of arrival, and passengers are not permitted to transit home (with limited exemptions). The location of quarantine is a hotel or other designated accommodation as determined by State or Territory governments.

With both inbound and outbound travel restrictions, the Australian Government has granted the ABF Commissioner powers authorising an exemption to travel restrictions on an individual basis for:

- Air and maritime crew;
- International transit passengers (if connecting flight within eight hours);
- Diplomats (to self-isolate at home); and
- Compassionate or urgent medical grounds.

Implementing travel restrictions

To implement these restrictions, the ABF pursued a multi-layered approach to ensure the safety of travellers. This includes:

- Strategic communication with airlines and peak industry bodies on new measures, including airlines and peak industry bodies on new measures;
- Establishment of hard border, with ABF Airline Liaison Officers in high risk locations preventing boarding of passengers displaying symptoms onto flights to Australia;
- Working with Australia's Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment to provide in-flight messaging and fact sheets, electronic signage and banners at airports, pre-recorded messages and Smartgate information in 21 languages;
- Enhanced ABF presence at pre-primary, primary line, immigration clearance and the baggage hall conducting real time assessment of travellers (particularly those from high-risk countries and those showing symptoms). ABF officers redirect travellers exhibiting symptoms to Department of Agriculture biosecurity officers;
- Marshalling passengers at airports to prevent congestion, including visual floor markings to support enforced social distancing, and staggering aircraft docking and disembarkations to manage passenger flow through airports; and
- Procuring security services to marshal and escort arriving passengers within required areas of the airport en route to buses taking them to their quarantine accommodation, and to provide a physical presence at hotels to ensure compliance.

Cruise Ships

To ensure the safety and welfare of Australian community, the Australian Government has also imposed restrictions on cruise ships in Australian waters. On 4 April 2020, the ABF Commissioner requested operators of foreign cruise ships to depart Australian waters, allowing time for refuel or resupply.

In managing these departures, the ABF's focus was the safety of lives at sea. As a result, three cruise ships were allowed to stay beyond these dates while Australian health authorities worked with cruise ships operators to remove sick passengers and crew.

Repatriation

The ABF and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) have facilitated the inbound repatriation of over 10,000 Australian citizens or permanent residents, their immediate family and New Zealand citizens who usually reside in Australia.

The ABF and DFAT also facilitated outbound repatriation of 13,000 foreign nationals from Australia to their home countries, and international transit through Australia of over 2,000 passengers, mostly to the Pacific.

The ABF and DFAT are also liaising with foreign missions in Australia and the region to plan repatriation charter flights for their foreign nationals out of Australia and the Pacific.

Cross-border movement of relief and essential supplies

Australia implemented a new concessional item that provides a 'Free' rate of customs duty for eligible medical and hygiene goods capable of being used in response to the COVID 19 pandemic. The new concessional item reduces the cost of goods imported to assist in the government and community response to the pandemic. The new concessional item applies to goods imported between 1 February 2020 and 31 July 2020.

The list of goods and conditions of the concessional item can be found here <https://www.abf.gov.au/help-and-support-subsite/CustomsNotices/2020-20.pdf>.

Australia also established a Transport and Freight Taskforce involving a number of Australian Government agencies to facilitate the expedited clearance of essential air cargo.

Sustaining supply chain continuity

The Australian Border Force (ABF) is working in partnership with the Australian Government's Supermarkets Taskforce to implement temporary measures to fast track the movement of essential groceries.

The ABF streamlined its border compliance activities to facilitate the entry of high volume grocery goods into Australia. The ABF will continue its practice of giving customs clearance to most high volume grocery goods even before they arrive in Australia.

Interception of counterfeit medical supplies

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Border Force (ABF) has continued its community protection mission by regulating the movement of prohibited goods across the border. This has included compliance activities for a diverse range of goods, including unsafe consumer goods and counterfeit goods. The ABF is working closely with the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), which has responsibility for regulating the movement of pharmaceuticals and medical devices into Australia. This includes facemasks and other PPE, as well as COVID-19 test kits. The ABF will seize goods suspected of breaching the *Therapeutic Goods Act 1989* upon request by the TGA.

Exportation of goods during the COVID-19 human biosecurity period

On 30 March 2020, the Australian Government introduced the Customs (Prohibited Exports) Amendment (COVID-19 Human Biosecurity Emergency) Regulations 2020 to prevent non-commercial exports of personal protective equipment (PPE), alcohol wipes and hand sanitiser. The ABF designed this temporary new measure to enable legitimate commercial trade and humanitarian consignments to continue. The temporary measure will only apply for the duration of the current COVID-19 biosecurity emergency period in Australia.

Exemptions apply in the following circumstances:

- for personal use by a passenger or crew member in their accompanied personal or household effects;
- by a person to a relative of the person, for the relative's personal use
- by a humanitarian organisation for non-commercial purposes;
- by an Australian manufacturer of the goods; or
- by a person who exported those types of goods in the course of their ordinary business, and is registered for Australian Goods and Services Tax and has an Australian Business Number.

The Australian Government remains committed to ensuring international trade can continue to flow during these difficult times.

Engagement with industry

The ABF has been working with maritime and aviation stakeholders, including ports, airports, airlines, cruise ship operators and the offshore oil and gas industry on the operational and workforce impacts of the COVID-19 response measures.

The ABF is supporting trade-related stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic by convening a monthly teleconference with approximately 80 trade-related stakeholders across industry and Government. These monthly meetings update stakeholders on the COVID-19 responses by Australian Government agencies. The teleconferences also provide industry with an opportunity to resolve any concerns regarding importing, exporting and transshipment.

The ABF is also working across Government to respond directly to trade-related COVID-19 questions raised through a dedicated industry engagement mailbox.

International engagement

ABF engaged with the World Customs Organization (WCO) to encourage consistent COVID-19 customs policy responses at the international level, and to share insights and best practices.

Australia is also focusing on assisting its Pacific neighbours with their respective COVID-19 responses. The ABF is working closely with Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to facilitate the shipment of essential goods to Pacific countries, and to ensure the orderly transshipment through Australia of COVID-19 related equipment.

Protection of ABF staff

The Australian Border Force (ABF) has a standing PPE capacity in order to support staff who may be exposed to physical, chemical or biological hazards in the course of their duties. At the time of the COVID-19 response, the ABF increased its procurement, storage and distribution capacity to issue staff in front line roles with the appropriate quantity and standard of PPE.

The quantities and standards for PPE reflect advice provided by the Department of Health, clinical advice provided from the Department of Home Affairs and the operational risk assessments made by the ABF.

The increase in PPE capacity occurred over a period of weeks. The ABF varied and repurposed existing contracts and arrangements with panel providers to meet the required demand for PPE, with detailed governance and auditing to monitor PPE requirements and supplies.

Frontline officers include all officers in close contact with inbound and outbound passengers, through scheduled commercial flights, chartered repatriation flights and the maritime environment.

All frontline staff have been provided with instructions in the safe use of PPE, as well as enhanced physical distancing and hand hygiene. The maintenance of hygiene standards in all ABF workspaces has been through antimicrobial wipes and surface sprays. Supervisors are required to be vigilant in the monitoring of staff use and disposal of PPE and maintaining hygiene standards. The ABF sourced additional cleaning product for use in its workspaces, in addition to additional commercial cleaning.

The ABF also established a consistent work health and safety standard for its officers and an overarching strategy for the health, safety and wellbeing of its officers.