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# Confidence testing for critical biosecurity functions review

**Confidence testing for critical biosecurity functions—a review of the department’s policies, systems, personnel capability, processes and communication to support discharge of biosecurity responsibilities at the frontline**

## Objective

To examine the effectiveness of the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment’s (the department’s) systems, policies and processes in place to support biosecurity officers in the discharge of their frontline prevention biosecurity responsibilities, including in cooperation with other agencies.

## Context

On 14 August 2020, the New South Wales (NSW) government released a [report](https://www.rubyprincessinquiry.nsw.gov.au/) of the NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into Ruby Princess cruise liner incident. The report identified areas for improvement in the way in which the department delivers some of its biosecurity functions.

On 26 August 2010, the Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management, Hon David Littleproud MP requested the Inspector-General of Biosecurity to complete a review of relevant issues, including (in summary) the department’s:

* awareness of its responsibilities and that of other agencies,
* communication and interaction with other agencies, and
* protocols and procedures for delivering border biosecurity functions.

# The Inspector-General considers it is unlikely that the issues that led to weaknesses in the department’s role in the Ruby Princess incident are limited to a pathway (cruise, cargo and live animal export ships), a region or specific First Point of Entry (Sydney) or human health (COVID-19) risks. This review will have an initial focus on the issues leading to weaknesses in the department’s role with respect to the Ruby Princess incident—following which, a similar analysis to other risk areas, where the consequences of regulatory failures may be extreme, will be applied.

## Background

While Australia’s geographical isolation has played a key role in maintaining this status, its isolation as an island nation is rapidly changing as the barriers of time and distance become less relevant and international travel and trade increase.

With more than 60,000 kilometres of coastline offering a variety of pathways for exotic pests and diseases, the department screens, inspects and clears the millions of people, mail parcels, baggage, ships, animals, plants and cargo containers entering Australia every year—using intervention by regulatory officers, plus such tools as X-ray machines, surveillance and detector dogs.

The department is the lead regulatory agency for managing biosecurity in Australia. Biosecurity controls at Australia’s borders minimise the risk of exotic pests and diseases entering Australia, protect the health of the Australian people, and our $32 billion agriculture export industries as well as our unique environment, native flora and fauna, our tourism industries and lifestyle. Biosecurity risks are increasing due to increased scale and speed of global trade and travel, increased agricultural expansion and intensification, increased urbanisation close to farmlands, and climate change.

A tight fiscal environment for governments, together with expanding trade and travel, has placed significant pressure on the ongoing capacity of biosecurity agencies to meet their evolving biosecurity commitments. Biosecurity stakeholders, especially those bearing an increasing share of the costs, want a greater say in decision-making about the national system, greater alignment of biosecurity and market access efforts, more efficient delivery of government biosecurity services, and stronger arrangements for environmental biosecurity, among other things. In addition, major biosecurity incidents continue to test public confidence in the national biosecurity arrangements.

Infectious human diseases have increased over the last 3 decades, with more than 70 per cent of these diseases being zoonotic in nature—that is, passing from animals to people—for example, influenzas from poultry or pigs, Ebola, sudden acute and Middle East respiratory syndromes (SARS, MERS), and Nipah and Hendra viruses.

Constant vigilance is required to maintain Australia’s strict quarantine measures that prevent a zoonotic disease incursion that could have serious impacts on people, domesticated animals and wildlife. One breakdown of this system of biosecurity measures occurred for the Ruby Princess cruise ship incident that led to spread of COVID-19 in various parts of Australia and overseas.

## Scope

This review will cover examining the department’s policies, management systems, documentation and processes in place to support frontline biosecurity officers in the discharge of border responsibilities—consistent with the *Biosecurity Act 2015*—unilaterally and in cooperation with other Commonwealth and state/territory agencies.

The review will consider:

* The adequacy of departmental processes to manage current biosecurity risks, and identify and respond to emerging human biosecurity risks associated with arriving vessels (cruise liners, and cargo and live animal export ships).
* How the department:
* profiles, assesses, targets, screens and inspects international vessels at First Points of Entry in delivering biosecurity function of behalf of the Commonwealth Department of Health
* collaborates with other Commonwealth and state/territory agencies in delivering biosecurity activities in this pathway
* undertakes verification activities, if any, to ensure robustness of biosecurity controls for this pathway.
* Operational policies on:
* the management of commercial vessels
* technical and regulatory competence of biosecurity officers—skills, experience, training, job cards, supervision, refresher courses, verification records.
* Standard operating procedures (instructional material)—availability, appropriateness and currency.
* Assessment of data collection and management systems used for decision-making, and their integration for ease of data extraction to inform biosecurity risk management, including policy formulation and development.
* Mechanisms for sharing information with other Commonwealth, and state/territory government agencies and industry bodies (such as, port authorities, cruise ship operators etc.).
* Identifying improvements required to manage biosecurity risks.

This review will not examine:

* any post-border (domestic) biosecurity responsibilities or functions,
* policies and activities of external stakeholders, including other Commonwealth agencies, state/territory governments and individuals, and
* commercial considerations.

## Contact

If you wish to discuss this review, you can contact the Inspector-General as below:

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