

Q u a r a n t i n e a n d B i o s e c u r i t y R e v i e w

Statement by Panel of Inquiry into Biosecurity and Quarantine in relation to Recommendation 59 to permit import of virus material for research, diagnostic and response purposes.

Recommendation 59 should be read in the context of the whole report and the scheme for assessment and approval of all imports proposed by the Panel in its report *One Biosecurity – a Working Partnership*.

It was never intended to suggest that importation of live virus material, including foot and mouth, would occur other than through the processes outlined in the report for all imports. Given their sensitivity, any import proposals would be required to be the subject of the closest scrutiny by the National Biosecurity Commission and relevant consultative processes under the risk assessment guidelines to be set by the Minister. Currently, these processes include the Animal Health Committee which comprises the Chief Veterinary officers of all jurisdictions and other stakeholders. It was not proposed that these, possibly the most sensitive of all imports, would be “greenlighted” without such a review, including review of the security of laboratory and handling protocols.

Rather, the Panel’s concern was that there should not be a blanket government policy ban on the import of all or some of this material. Its intent was that there should be a case by case examination, with all the risks, costs and benefits examined. In this regard, the Panel noted that while the import of such material posed risks, it could also provide benefits in terms of emergency disease preparedness and response in the event of an incursion. A blanket ban would also raise the costs of research carried out by Australian scientists by requiring it to be done by third party facilities in Thailand, South Africa, Argentina or the UK, and reduce their familiarity with working with these materials.

It is true that there was no specific recommendation in the formal submissions to the Panel in relation to the desirability or otherwise of the importation of FMD material. However, these issues were discussed by the Panel with interlocutors from major research and analytical bodies. It is important to remember that the recommendation only parenthetically refers to FMD, and there is a range of other disease agents as well as plant material, where researchers and analysts suggested that current policies were overly restrictive and facilities limited, as a result limiting research, diagnostic, disease transmission modelling and response capabilities.

The Panel reiterates that it was not proposing the import of any specific, or all, live virus material which could present a threat to Australia’s agriculture and environment without further review and assessment of risk – far from it. The Panel’s intention was to signal that this review and discussion should happen in the proper scientific sphere (and none of the Panel would regard themselves as having the relevant skills in this regard), on a case by case basis, rather than being suppressed by blanket government policy.

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