

Interview

Dr Bradley Armstrong PSM, Deputy Comptroller-General and Group Manager of Customs Group, Australian Border Force (ABF)

Paul Zalai, Director FTA, speaks to Brad Armstrong about his new role as Deputy Comptroller-General and Group Manager of Customs Group at the ABF.

1. PAUL ZALAI - Brad, you were appointed to your new role on 1 July 2019. How significant is the establishment of the Customs Group in the ABF?

The Customs Group supports the Government’s strong focus on border and customs policy and program management and encompasses trade, customs and traveller related policy, and program management of key government initiatives such as the Australian Trusted Trader program and implementation of the Modern Slavery Act.

The new group better integrates and elevates the trade, traveller and customs function within the Home Affairs Portfolio and, more broadly, across government. The group will enable greater levels of industry and civil engagement with a primary focus on supporting the



movement and clearance of legitimate goods and travellers seeking to cross our border.

2. PAUL ZALAI - You said the Customs Group will support the movement and clearance of legitimate goods and travellers, but what about the other side of the coin – will you also focus on trade enforcement?

The ABF’s role at the border covers a broad spectrum of activities to support legitimate traders while ensuring traders are unable to gain an unfair advantage or break the law. On the enforcement side, combatting illicit trade and black economy activity is a key priority. Shutting down black economy activity protects the Australian community, stops revenue leakage, and ensures a level playing field for business.

3. PAUL ZALAI - How do you intend to manage increasing traveller numbers across Australia’s border?

Australia benefits from being open and connected to the world, resulting in increasing traveller numbers across our border. In the past 10 years to November 2018, passenger movements across Australia’s borders increased by more than 75 per cent (from approximately 23.9 million to nearly 42 million per annum). Tourism Research Australia predicts growth of 75 per cent in international visitors through to 2026-27.

The ABF prioritises protecting our national security while supporting our economy. Security and border management threats continue to evolve, while travellers expect fast, simpler border services. This places pressure



on port infrastructure and front line ABF officers. To address this, the ABF, in partnership with industry, are moving away from manual processes to a model where data informs our risk assessment and intervention.

The Customs Group is working across government and with industry to remove duplication and unnecessary touchpoints. While Government will continue to set standards, maintain security and regulate border management, over time we anticipate industry will have greater capacity to control customer services, offering differentiated levels of facilitation, with less restriction on how this is done.

4. PAUL ZALAI - How do you see Australian Trusted Trader (ATT) and customs licensed entities contributing to strengthening Australia's Customs Service in support of legitimate goods crossing our border?

Australian Trusted Trader is a government partnership with Australian traders and service providers, for those entities that meet or exceed international supply chain security and trade compliance standards.

Australian Trusted Trader reduces red tape at the border for Trusted Traders, improves certainty in export markets, and expedites the flow of cargo in and out of Australia, which means faster access to market.

Customs brokers, depots and warehouses also hold a privileged role of trust within the supply chain and play a significant role in the protection of



Canberra meeting with the new Customs Group executive - Andrew Crawford, Head of Border and Biosecurity, FTA; Paul Zalai, Director FTA; Dr Bradley Armstrong PSM, Deputy Comptroller-General of Customs, Group Manager, Customs Group, ABF; Christie Sawczuk, Assistant Secretary, Trade Modernisation and Industry Engagement Branch, Customs Group, ABF; Susan Turnville, acting Assistant Secretary, Customs and Border Revenue Branch, Customs Group, ABF

Australia's borders and economy. With the ever-increasing volume of goods crossing our border, Trusted Traders and licensed service providers play a crucial role in assisting the ABF in identifying high-risk shipments as well as ensuring collection of Commonwealth revenue is not at risk. As such, entities that hold accreditation need to ensure they have appropriate measures in place to ensure they remain compliant with Australia's laws and are not at risk of being infiltrated by criminal organisations.

5. PAUL ZALAI - Brad, the Customs Group is also responsible for implementing Australia's Modern Slavery Act. What does the Act aim to achieve?

Millions of modern slavery victims are hidden in global supply chains. Australia's ground-breaking Modern Slavery Act, that came into effect on 1 January 2019, aims to tackle the horrors

of modern slavery by requiring over 3,000 businesses to report annually on their actions to address modern slavery risks in their global supply chains and operations. In a world first, the Australian Government will also comply with the Act and report on its actions to combat modern slavery risks in its procurement and investment.

6. PAUL ZALAI - Home Affairs and the ABF have previously advised that work was underway to modernise Australia's international supply chain. Can you provide an update on this work?

The Customs Group is developing a customs and border modernisation agenda to enhance service delivery, improve compliance and border protection, and better detect illicit trade. This agenda seeks to reduce red tape for Australian businesses and ensure trade is seamless, digital and secure. We expect the Government will consider this agenda next year. We will continue progressing short to medium term trade initiatives. For example, we are currently working with New Zealand Customs Service to undertake a live digital trial of a secure trade lane with trusted businesses by June 2020. We have a lot to learn from industry's expertise. Australia's future customs and border systems need to be co-designed with industry. We welcome industry's ideas and partnerships in testing initiatives. The Customs Group will be actively engaging across industry and industry organisations, such as the Freight & Trade Alliance (FTA), to seek business point-of-view.

