

Working together to face the challenges

By Hon JASON WOOD MP. Assistant Minister for Customs, Community Safety and Multicultural Affairs

Like many of you, I will remember 2020 as a year that tested our flexibility and resilience in the face of immense challenges. The high degree of cooperation between industry, the Australian Border Force (ABF) and other government agencies enabled us to successfully meet many of the challenges of COVID-19 together.

I thank the Freight & Trade Alliance (FTA) and the Australian Peak Shippers' Association (APSA) for your help in supporting Australia's response to COVID-19.

The effects of the pandemic are both significant and ongoing. Government and industry will need to continue to adapt and establish new ways of working together to support our economic recovery.

While every country around the world grapples with unique COVID-19 conditions, Australia has done well, largely in part because the Government, supported by industry, took swift and early action to restrict international travel and protect the community.

We are also taking steps to support Australian industry and economic recovery. We are working with States and Territories and whole-of-government partners to facilitate the safe movement of maritime and air crew, seasonal workers and New Zealand travellers. We continue to put efforts towards preventing the spread of the pandemic on our shores, while working on reopening the border to international travellers, as it becomes safe to do so.

We have successfully supported keeping international supply chains operating during the pandemic, enabling Australians to access vital imported goods. We have supported Australian exporters to continue to get their goods to global markets. Together we have ensured Australians have continued access to vital health and safety equipment by applying tariff concessions for imported goods used to combat COVID-19, while also implementing temporary regulations to prevent profiteering from the export of essential goods.

Beyond our borders, Australia has worked with international partners to overcome the disruptions to trade

and travel caused by COVID-19. The ABF Commissioner was instrumental in establishing a new World Customs Organization (WCO) passenger control and facilitation working group with the aim to develop international standards on exchanging information on travellers' vaccination status to assist with the safe reopening of borders. Similarly, Australia also led a coalition of countries calling for an action-orientated response from the WCO to develop a global approach to facilitate movements of COVID-19 vaccines and limit illicit vaccine trade.

The ABF has swiftly responded to new passenger, mail and cargo volumes resulting from the pandemic. Reductions in passenger and international mail were matched by a 10.35% increase in air cargo and an astounding 139.5% increase in sea cargo in 2020. ABF redeployed resources to address pressure points at ports, and will continue to work on potential freight blockages while keeping Australia safe and secure.

As the economy recovers, the Government will continue to promote opportunities to build economic growth. The ABF is progressing its contributions to the Government's Simplified Trade System agenda, with \$28.6 million in funding announced in the 2020-21 budget. This program brings together a suite of forward-looking regulatory reform and digital investments across Government to create a simpler, more efficient and digitised trade system for Australian business and build towards the ultimate stand-up of a Trade Single Window.

Work to advance the agenda will include opportunities to learn from industry and international counterparts to trial cross border trade solutions. An example of this has been the recent successful trial the ABF undertook with the Singapore Government to test solutions to make cross-border trade simpler

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and paperless for Australian business. Under this initiative the ABF developed the Intergovernmental Ledger (IGL) as a verifiable credentials platform, built on block chain technology it authenticates trade documents.

More broadly, the ABF continues to seek opportunities to benefit industry and provide greater certainty when trading with our key overseas markets through mutual recognition between Australian and overseas customs administrations' trust based facilitation programs.

The ABF has embarked on an ambitious program of negotiation for Australian Trusted Trader Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) with the United States, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. This is in addition to our signed MRAs with eight economies – Canada, China, Hong Kong, Japan, The Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Singapore and Taiwan.

In this edition of Across Borders, ABF Commander Special Investigations, Greg Linsdell talks about how industry supports the ABF as the lead agency of the Illicit Tobacco Taskforce (ITTF), to combat the trade of illicit tobacco in Australia.



L to R - Andrew Crawford (Member Representative Border & Biosecurity - FTA/APSA), Paul Zalai (FTA/APSA), Sal Milici (Head of Border & Biosecurity - FTA/APSA), the Hon Jason Wood, Dr Bradley Armstrong PSM

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Commander Linsdell, his team, and the ABF as a whole for seizing over 432 million cigarettes and 177 tonnes of loose leaf tobacco with an estimated value of \$621.45 million in evaded duty in the 2019-2020 financial year.

Once again I thank you for your cooperation during these challenging times and look forward to our continued work in protecting our community and supporting Australia's economic recovery.

Enjoy this edition of Across Borders.

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