

Cooperating against foot and mouth disease

Close cooperation between Customs and the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) is central in the fight against foot and mouth disease.

At the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Britain in February, the importation of live animals, semen, uncooked meat and unprocessed dairy products from foot and mouth affected countries was banned by the Australian Government. Customs and AQIS took immediate action to ensure that the disease would not be introduced to Australia.

It was announced in the Budget that Customs would receive an extra \$238.8m to be used over the next four years – strengthening Australia's defence against the introduction of exotic pests and diseases, including foot and mouth disease. AQIS will receive \$281.4 million.

The additional funding also will enable an increase in examination rates to 100 per cent of all international mail, 100 per cent of high-volume low-value (HVLV) cargo, 100 per cent of sea passenger

baggage, 100 per cent shipping and 81 per cent of air passenger baggage nationally. It will also fund about 500 additional Customs staff to process air passengers, post and HVLV cargo. Additional staffing has also been allocated for processing sea passengers.

Funds raised from an increase in the passenger movement charge and charges on import entries and certain air packages will be channelled to fund the work at the border.

The Budget statement indicated that the Government had decided to continue its policy of full cost recovery for these activities. Cost was estimated at \$10.7m a year. Following discussions with the Customs National Consultative Committee meeting on 6 June, it was decided to distribute the amount across the air and postal cargo clearance spectrum.

The increase in import-processing charges and the passenger-movement charge from \$30 to \$38 will assist in recovering costs incurred by Customs for passenger processing at international airports.

To achieve the new examination targets, infrastructure changes are required at airports and international mail centres. These changes will accommodate new X-ray machines, examination benches and additional staff, particularly in Victoria and NSW. At airports and mail centres, regional project teams from Customs, AQIS and other relevant bodies, including Australia Post and airport authorities, are working on making the changes.

Increased screenings throughout Australia by both Customs and the Australian Quarantine and



Inspection Service had resulted in the seizure of a number of dangerous items not directly associated with FMD. These include:

- Seizure of about 14,000 ecstasy tablets last month after X-rays revealed a possible narcotic concealment within a sports bag, and
- Seizure of up to 1kg of heroin found in shampoo bottles, and detected by X-ray equipment.

Customs officers are asking all air passengers if they have spent time in countries affected by foot and mouth disease. Passengers arriving from affected countries are referred to AQIS so that baggage, clothes and shoes can be examined for any risks, such as soil or food products. At international mail centres, Customs has been referring all mail from affected countries to AQIS, which seizes any items posing a quarantine risk.

It is usual practice for Customs to provide AQIS with information about cargo, allowing AQIS to examine any cargo that presents a quarantine risk. Customs is now assisting AQIS to physically examine air cargo document shipments.

The increased charges in relation to both electronic and manual air/post entries, air cargo charges not requiring an import entry or "screen frees" and the high-volume low-value cargo-reporting charge were introduced on 1 July. Details are contained in Australian Customs Notice 2001/41, available from the Customs Internet page at www.customs.gov.au.



Customs Melbourne airport manager, Kevin Fraser (left), shows Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Chris Ellison some of the prohibited items seized at the airport during a recent display of seized items for the media.