



# Checking the mail

It is known as the Sydney Gateway Facility. It is not the port. Neither is it the airport. Yet it is one of the most important entry points into Australia.

Located at Clyde near Parramatta, in Sydney's western suburbs, the Sydney Gateway Facility is Australia Post's largest international mail centre.

Into the building comes over half the overseas air and all surface mail landed in the country. Letters and packages of all shapes and sizes arrive here to be sorted for onward delivery to all points north, south, east and west.

Inside this special border facility is a large Customs presence. For it is the role of Customs, along with the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS), to ensure that all the mail is checked prior to distribution to businesses and homes across the country.

The Australian Government charges the two border agencies with looking out for prohibited imports to prevent them from reaching the community. For Customs, these items can be anything from drugs, firearms and other weapons through to therapeutic medicines, counterfeit goods, banned books and pornographic material. AQIS is concerned with preventing pests and diseases from getting into Australia through the importation of foodstuffs, vegetable matter and animal products. Customs has another role in that it assesses the value of incoming goods to see if any duty and a Goods and Service Tax (GST) is payable.

To ensure the mail gets through in a timely manner, Customs and AQIS work cooperatively together and in concert with Australia Post.

"We screen the mail as Australia Post presents it to us. While we look at everything, they determine which order we look at it. This is because some of its product has tighter delivery standards than others. For instance, air mail has a tighter delivery schedule than sea mail," said Mr Frost.

While all sea mail and most air mail that comes into Sydney is processed by

above: Chris Pardey with some counterfeit DVDs intercepted by Customs in the post.

insert: Kamil Serdar x-raying the mail.



Customs at the facility, express mail service articles and registered and insured articles are received at the Qantas Mail Handling Unit within the perimeter of Sydney Airport.

As Manager Post, Mr Frost is also responsible for the Customs operation at the mail handling unit at the airport. Some nine officers are deployed at the unit while the vast majority of his area - 84 officers - are involved in duties at the Clyde facility.

The Sydney Gateway Facility has been at Clyde since the late 1980s, having outgrown its previous premises in inner city Redfern.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and also because of the foot and mouth disease outbreak in Europe, the Federal Government has provided increased resources to border agencies such as Customs to drastically step up security at the border. At this Customs postal operation, this has almost doubled the staff and given an equally significant boost to technological resources. These

include more sophisticated x-ray machines, ionscan particle analysis equipment and narcotic field test kits.

What was once not possible is now reality—the 100 per cent screening by Customs, in conjunction with AQIS, of all imported mail.

Mr Frost said, "This comprehensive screening process means that we assess the mail in a number of different ways. The mail is either x-rayed by us or we may use our dogs to run over it. We select some packages for opening to physically examine the contents. If we assess there is nothing of Customs interest, then AQIS will x-ray it or use its dogs to check it out."

The screening task at the facility is a six days-a-week operation, Sunday to Friday, from 6.45 am to 10 pm, mirroring Australia Post's regular hours of operation. In an average month, Customs here processes 62,000 parcels and more than half a million small packets. The festive season presents a challenge with a 60 per cent surge in the volume of mail that is handled. Last

year, Customs, AQIS and Australia Post worked around the clock in the week leading up to Christmas to deal with the much heavier workload.

Currently, Customs and AQIS have six x-ray machines between them at the facility. The x-ray is able to provide a high definition colour image of the contents of packages. It can identify hard matter, plastics and organic material. From the image produced on the screen, an assessment can be made on what goods are contained within the package and whether they match up with the compulsory declaration on the exterior wrapping. A subsequent physical check of suspect packages either confirms or allays officers' suspicions.

If a package contains a prohibited import, decisions have to be made as to what action should be taken. Mr Frost explains that officers have a number of options. "We will hand over some items to the Australian Federal Police, which will carry out its own investigation and prosecution. This is particularly the case



A sample of prohibited imports seized by Customs officers at the Sydney Gateway Facility.



in relation to narcotics. Some banned or restricted products are handed over to our Investigations section for it to deal with. There is other product which should not be delivered in the mail that we will refer back to Australia Post."

In every case, the circumstances of an illegal importation are taken into consideration. While prosecution is much more likely for items of a serious nature, for deliberate concealments and for regular abusers of the system, in many cases seizure of the offending item is considered sufficient.

Because of the dramatic increase in the use of the Internet as a comparatively easy way of ordering goods from overseas, there has been a corresponding rise in Customs detecting prohibited or restricted imports. While a major focus is on finding illicit drugs, the drug seizures tend to be frequent but small, due to the size of packages in the mail. Firearms and firearm parts are often sent through the post as well. More often than not, they are being legally imported. Customs holds these weapons until the relevant clearances have been obtained.

Counterfeit goods also present an issue for Customs. A topical subject is DVDs. Some arrive in envelopes containing as little as five DVDs while other packages can contain much larger quantities. As the DVD logo is a registered trademark, anything bearing the logo needs the registered trademark holder to clear the DVDs before they are released. If the DVD is a copy, then it is also in breach of trade description regulations. Officers at the facility are now intercepting up to 2,000 bootleg DVD copies of movies every month.

Recently, officers came across at least 30 people who had bought over the Internet cameras and camera equipment from the same supplier. Some were surprised and aggrieved when they discovered they had to go through a Customs importation process for the cameras, which they believed they had bought from an Australian-based company. While the supplier had an Australian-sounding Internet address,

the company was actually located overseas. What the supplier's website failed to mention was that GST would be payable on the purchase for Australian buyers.

Customs currently averages about \$450,000 a month in revenue collection from a combination of commercial articles and private importations that are assessed at the facility.

Mr Frost explained that "Any item valued at over \$1,000 will have to be formally entered through Customs with the appropriate paperwork. Goods that do not meet that \$1,000 threshold but are subject to duty and sales tax in excess of \$50 will be levied. As for unsolicited gifts, we allow a concession of \$200 on the cost of the item before making an assessment."

Customs officers do not open any packages themselves. The *Postal Communications Act* requires Australia Post to carry out opening and resealing. Every item examined by Customs or AQIS is marked to show it has been subject to scrutiny.

"The fact that we have examined a parcel certainly does not mean the recipient will be targeted for future examinations," Mr Frost said. "We make the judgement at the time based on a number of factors including whether the item is declared, what we see on the x-ray screen and the source country. Any number of factors may require us to have a careful look."

However, anyone importing a prohibited import can expect that fact to be recorded, even if there is no other action taken by Customs at the time.

One area demanding extreme care covers occupational health and safety for all those working within the facility. With heavy machinery such as conveyor belts and x-ray machines, every Customs



Gabby Mangulabnan checking the mail. officer is required to wear safety vests and shoes. Occasionally suspect powders are detected in packages. An emergency procedure is then set in motion. On some of these occasions, the fire authority's hazardous materials team are called in to declare the goods safe.

Summing up, Mr Frost relates working in the postal environment as being probably a microcosm of all Customs activities. "We not only have typical border protection responsibilities but a commercial and community protection role as well."

Mr Frost had this to say about making significant detections: "You can walk away from here happy that you have stopped some bad things from coming in. You also get satisfaction out of just guiding people through either the commercial or border process."

For information on importing goods through the mail, contact the Customs Information Centre on 1300 363 263, or by email at [info@customs.gov.au](mailto:info@customs.gov.au). The Customs website at [www.customs.gov.au](http://www.customs.gov.au) is also a source of useful information.