

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS
AND TRANSPORT**
Australian Quarantine Inspection Service
Discussion

Senator MILNE—I wanted to ask about the abalone virus. Is it appropriate to do so now?

CHAIR—Yes. I am sorry, Senator **Milne**, it was a bit hard to hear. What virus?

Senator MILNE—Ganglioneuritis, or the abalone virus, in Bass Strait. I have had quite a lot of correspondence from the abalone divers around the country, who are very unhappy with the lack of intervention from the Victorian government in relation to containing this virus. They have asked the Commonwealth to take over the management and all ongoing management of the disease on the basis that it is likely to go beyond state boundaries and that aquatic diseases should be regarded as a national issue and we need to move quickly to close some areas because they say it is clear that human intervention is essentially leading to the spread of the disease through recreational fishery and other things. I would like to know why the Commonwealth has been reluctant to get involved in stopping the spread of this disease and is leaving it to Victoria.

Mr Aldred—First and foremost, it is a jurisdictional response issue with Victoria. I think it has been indicated previously that under the national arrangements it is a Victorian responsibility to manage it, which they have been doing. Secondly, we have had recent discussions with a range of representatives from the wild capture abalone industry to try to kick start, or get some more communication around, the sorts of activities that are being carried out. That has only just happened recently, but I am hopeful that the industry will appreciate that support. One of the key parts, though, is the difficulty of controlling a virus such as this. A couple of the suggestions have been put up to quarantine the coastline and stop all commercial and recreational activity on it, which is impractical. We believe the virus can potentially spread in a number of ways. In an aquatic environment that is very difficult to control.

Senator MILNE—I am well aware of that.

Mr Aldred—As to the key things to be done, other jurisdictions should be having a look at the nature of checks. For example, some of the Tasmanian crews are worried. Again, it becomes a jurisdictional issue to look at control activities.

Senator MILNE—I have difficulty with the jurisdictional issue when we are talking about a disease that can wipe out this industry essentially, and one state is held ransom to another if that state is not adequately dealing with the disease. Surely the Commonwealth has a responsibility if a disease is going to spread beyond a state boundary, which it clearly will at the rate it is going. Why should the Commonwealth not review whether the state response is adequate? If it is not, it should come in over the top. Surely we are not going to leave it up to Victoria to let this disease get away from us.

Mr Aldred—Our officers are having discussions with their state colleagues but it is not one where we come in over the top. As to emergency arrangements in handling this sort of outbreak, we have a role of national coordination, and states and territories are responsible for the control activities. The Victorian government

has been active certainly in looking at abalone farms, destocking and cleaning the farms and re-establishing. It is difficult in the wild environment.

Senator MILNE—Yes, but there has been no attempt to stop the dumping of untreated effluent from abalone processes into the marine environment. There have been no areas closed to recreational fisheries et cetera. As far as I can see, there has been no epidemiological review into Victoria's handling of this escape. Will the Commonwealth conduct such a review of the adequacy of the Victorian response?

Mr Aldred—We will work with our colleagues but, as I have indicated, it is not our position to come in over the top and to try and force or regulate the Victorian state government.

Senator MILNE—Even if the disease gets away and then wipes out the abalone fishery in Bass Strait for the Tasmanian fishery as well?

Mr Aldred—I have covered the arrangements as they operate.

Senator MILNE—I do not find the arrangements satisfactory. You have a disease in the marine environment, and the marine environment covers South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania in terms of the fisheries, and the Victorian government is more or less just saying, 'Well, that's it. It's in the marine environment and it's moving.' The divers tell me that you can trace the spread of it by essentially the human movement. They say that it travelled 100 kilometres along the coast very rapidly at one stage and broke out somewhere else, and you would have to put that down to human movement because that is not the normal pattern for the spread of the disease and so on. Will the Commonwealth undertake any reviews? Are you satisfied that Victoria is doing everything it can—that everything that can be done is being done—in relation to stopping the spread of this disease?

Mr Aldred—As I have indicated a couple of times, we will continue discussions with our state colleagues. I will not make a statement about whether we are satisfied. We are continuing those discussions. As I have indicated, we have recently met with industry representatives, and I do hope that cooperative arrangements and some further discussions with the Victorian government will move things forward.

Senator MILNE—Have you put to the Victorians that they should be quarantining areas known to have active virus from all human activity?

Mr Aldred—I would have to take that on notice. I do not know that we have provided any specific advice of that nature.

Senator MILNE—What advice have you provided to them about your views on what they should be doing?

Mr Aldred—I will take that on notice. I will need to get records of the meetings. I was not part of the meetings.

Senator MILNE—I would specifically like to know whether you have asked them to quarantine areas with the active virus from all activity, whether you have asked them to stop dumping untreated effluent from licensed abalone processors into the marine environment, and whether there has been any discussion about

having a Commonwealth review of the abalone aquaculture industry with a view to developing a management response that might be consistently applied regardless of where any disease might break out in the future. It seems to me that is what we need, a uniform set of responses that must be brought into play whichever jurisdiction it happens to be in.

Mr Aldred—I will take that on notice.

Senator MILNE—As I have said, people are very unhappy that there seems to be more respect for jurisdictional responsibilities than there is for the fact that this disease is spreading and people seem to be wringing their hands.

Senator Sherry—I will take that on notice and I will see whether the minister has anything further to add given the situation.

Senator MILNE—Thank you.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Isn't it stupid not to do anything? Wouldn't you make a declaration? It could well wipe out the industry. As Senator Scullion pointed out, do they really know what is causing this?

Senator MILNE—No.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Do you want to let the abalone industry be wiped out and just sit around and have another meeting to look at the rules?

Mr S Hunter—As Mr Aldred has said, we have been engaged with Victoria in discussions around the issue. The arrangements that we have nationally to manage animal and plant diseases in this country, whether they relate to this particular disease or more generally, are built upon a cooperative structure, which we have seen work very well in a number of cases. We invest a great deal in this as a department, and it depends greatly on us not standing in judgement of other states and territories.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Someone has to be in charge of the whole show. Why can't you appoint a task force to deal with this issue, which overarches the Commonwealth and the three states, including Tasmania, and approach it like it is an Army operation, otherwise you are just going to watch on as bit by bit they destroy the industry.

Mr Aldred—There are consultative arrangements in place.

Senator HEFFERNAN—Who is in charge of this?

Mr Aldred—The point that I have made is that the Australian government will not come over the top and enforce or direct the Victorian government.

Senator HEFFERNAN—With great respect, is that because the states are sooking? Why wouldn't you? It is like fires. These days we have bigger fires because some galoot 50 miles from the fire at headquarters tries to tell the people at the fire how to fight the fire.

Mr Aldred—The arrangements cross-border in dealing with fires are similar. The state and territory governments have—

Senator HEFFERNAN—This is crazy stuff.

Senator Sherry—I will pass on your obvious concern and Senator Milne's concern to the minister. At the end of the day, if it does require greater Commonwealth action it would obviously involve the minister, and I will pass that on to her.

CHAIR—Thank you for that. I heard a comment that this is the third time it has been raised. It has been. This government has been in power for six months and it is not the first time it has been raised. I remember it being brought up on this committee the first time we had discussions. The minister has said that he will raise it and come back to us.

Senator HEFFERNAN—As you know, Mr Chairman, we do not care who is in government in this committee.

CHAIR—I understand that this is not the first time it has been raised. It was raised under the previous government as well. Senator **Milne**, have you finished your questions, seeing that the minister has agreed to take it on board and come back to us?

Senator MILNE—Yes, on the abalone virus.

CHAIR—You still have the call.

Senator MILNE—That is all right. You can come back to me in a minute. I want to go on to apples and pears.

CHAIR—In all fairness to this committee, is there anything else on the abalone virus, considering the minister's statement?

Senator McGAURAN—Yes. Just going back to the minister, could you find out, or let us know even now: there must be some legality with regard to national interest where you can intervene and take over as a matter of national interest.

Senator Sherry—You are seeking a legal basis for taking control of this situation?

Senator McGAURAN—Yes. In fact, I am certain there is.

Senator Sherry—Is that a question?

Senator McGAURAN—It is a question.

Senator Sherry—We will take that on notice and see if we can find a legal basis on which the Commonwealth can take over control of the fishery.

Senator McGAURAN—I know there are differences, but certainly the EI outbreak gave us the best example of where the Commonwealth did take control, with the cooperation of the states, and had the authority to do so. Given the slight differences, isn't that model one we should follow?

Senator Sherry—Horses and abalone?

Senator McGAURAN—Yes.

Senator Sherry—There is just a slight difference.

Senator McGAURAN—If you are going to compare them that way there is a big difference, but I am talking about the model of intervention.

Senator Sherry—The principle of urgency and national interest—albeit that it is Tasmania and Victoria, the principle of national urgency. As I say, I will raise it with the minister and we will see if he wants to treat the issue differently than it has so far been treated.

CHAIR—Are there any other questions re the abalone virus? If not, Senator Heffernan?