AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE
REVIEW OF THE INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS DURING COVID-19

Ports Australia is pleased to provide a submission to contribute to the Australian National Audit Office review of the international travel restrictions during COVID-19. Ports Australia commends the Australian Government's decisive actions to prioritise and protect the health, wellbeing, and security of the nation and its people. Ports Australia seeks to further support the Australian Government by advising on how these measures affect the port sector and opportunities to improve international travel policy to better allow for the continued operation of this essential industry.

Ports Australia is the peak industry body representing both publicly and privately owned port authorities and corporations across Australia. Ports Australia is governed by a Board of Directors comprising the Chief Executive Officers of 12 port corporations from across Australia.

The Australian ports are key infrastructure that allows for the movement of critical resources, commodities and passengers interstate and internationally and facilitates positive social and economic outcomes for Australia and Australians. As an island nation, Australia relies heavily on the maritime industry, with 98% of Australia's international trade, by weight, passing through the country's ports. Without the successful operation of the ports, Australia is unable to undertake a significant portion of its international trade, preventing the essential goods and services required to maintain the health and welfare of the population and incapacitating many sectors of the Australian economy.

State and federal policy plays an important role in the ability of the ports to function successfully and mitigate and minimise potential risks or issues. This submission provides feedback on how the COVID-19 international travel restrictions, implemented by the state and federal governments, have impacted on the port industry, and will address all three questions posed by the Australian National Audit Office.

Have Australia's COVID-19 international travel restrictions been informed by robust planning and policy advice?

Prompt government action and the use of health advice as a key decision driver in the COVID-19 pandemic is recognised, and simultaneously robust planning and policy advice is needed particularly when a pandemic continues for a significant period. Ports Australia perceives that there has been a need for international travel restrictions, and that restrictions could be improved through better alignment across governments, and closer government industry collaboration.

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International travel restrictions have impacted on the movement of maritime pilots, tug operators and vessel crew. These roles are highly specialised and rely on international and interstate fly-in fly-out (FIFO) workers. For example, a maritime pilot is qualified for a certain port, holding extensive shipping experience coupled with training over several years at that port.

On 9 April 2020, National Cabinet provided a class exemption for non-cruise maritime crew to allow their transit to and from Australia and between jurisdictions without undertaking quarantine. In principle, this was a significant measure to assure the integrity of the supply chain. However, as states and territories could adopt additional protocols in conjunction with this exemption, in reality, this exemption was not implemented by all states and territories. Hence, continued difficulty has ensued for some critical supply chain workers to attend their place of work without undertaking quarantine.

One example is the *Protocol for maritime crew members joining or signing off a vessel in Queensland*. As defined within this protocol, there is an exemption for needing to undertake quarantine for crew that operate vessels over 50 metres. A number of ocean towage crews and other small commercial vessel crews do not meet this 50 metre requirement, however continue to provide critical service provisions to smaller islands in the Pacific Ocean. Some of these vessels have travelled for more than 50 days offshore, they have still been required to quarantine on return to Queensland. This is an ongoing issue which needs to be addressed.

In addition, as state and territory borders open and close in response to COVID-19 outbreaks, concerns re-arise around whether a critical / essential worker status employed by a certain jurisdiction will continue and allow for critical maritime workers to attend their place of employment.

Alignment across governments

Understandably in the initial months of the pandemic international travel restrictions were difficult to plan for and implement. As COVID-19 has continued for a significant period, there continues to be opportunities to develop more effective policy across governments which will protect the Australian population and enable critical industries to operate in the most effective manner possible. Whilst it is acknowledged that states and territories require different policies to attend to the needs of a jurisdiction, clarity and transparency of these policies is essential. A single source of truth document produced and routinely updated by the Federal Government on all federal and jurisdictional policies that is accessible to all, is recommended. This would reduce uncertainty from industry and allow for improved adherence to policies throughout the country.

Government industry collaboration

In the first half of 2020, the Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications established a regular COVID-19 maritime response meeting which brings together federal and state and territory health and transport / infrastructure departments and maritime industry participants. Ports Australia perceives this as an important initiative and considers that further work could be leveraged off such meetings. For example, this

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close government industry engagement could be used to develop tailored plans to COVID-19 that address any industry specific needs and risks, including for travel measures. These could then be progressed to all levels of government for endorsement, and then be implemented as the nature and level of the pandemic risk changes.

Have effective arrangements been established to manage human biosecurity risk at the international border?

The protection of the health and welfare of port employees has been a principal focus of ports internationally and in Australia, as international crew and vessels are received on a regular basis. Port employees that need to undertake labour at the port for the continued functioning of the supply chain include maritime pilots, tugboat operators, and stevedores. Of these employees, maritime pilots are the first individuals to interact with and board a vessel approaching a port. As maritime pilotage is a highly skilled profession which requires specific knowledge of a stationed locality, there exists only a small number of pilots with expertise to navigate and steer a ship in and out of a specific port. Due to these reasons, pilot health and safety has been of utmost importance to ports in Australia.

Similarly, the health and safety of crew has been a priority for the ports. As seafarers are contained on a vessel away from shore for extended periods, the health of these workers is key. Therefore, procedures implemented by the ports have been conscious of and have taken into account the protection of both shore personnel and crew.

Ports across Australia have implemented Australian Government and jurisdictional COVID-19 requirements, as well as developing and implementing additional protocols and measures to safeguard port employees and crew. These have included, but are not limited to:

- Increased cleaning practices;
- Increased process digitisation to reduce paper based and/or face to face work such as for vessel safety checklists;
- The requirement for all port employees and contractors to declare their health status prior to commencing a shift;
- The requirement for pilots, other port employees that may come into contact with a vessel, and crew to minimise interactions, wear personal protective equipment, and adhere to social distancing; and
- The requirement to not board a ship where it has been advised that a crew member is symptomatic of COVID-19.

To supplement the above, Australian ports are continuing to investigate additional measures to support the safe and continued work of essential port employees and ship crew. For example, NSW Ports partnered with NSW Health to develop a proof of concept for rapid mobile COVID-19 screening for port workers and ship crew at Port of Botany and in May 2021 commenced a program, in

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conjunction with NSW Health, to deliver COVID vaccinations for seafarers onboard vessels that regularly visit Port Botany.

Have inwards and outwards travel exemptions been managed effectively?

Inward and outward travel exemptions could be managed more effectively, with suggestions for improved management detailed in response to question one.

It is also of note that internationally in response to COVID-19, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) agreed to the extension of seafarer contracts, allowing for service periods beyond the maximum allowable under the ITF or the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC). As mentioned previously, in Australia in response to COVID-19, the states and territories placed varied restrictions on shore leave and crew changes. This included some jurisdictions prohibiting all shore leave and crew changes, whilst others have allowed crew changes under certain circumstances. For example, in Queensland crew changes are allowed to occur and for this to occur in a safe manner, Maritime Safety Queensland with Queensland Health have developed and implemented a strict step by step protocol on crew changeovers in the state and a significant number of crew changeovers have now successfully occurred in Queensland. Extensions to seafarer contracts coupled with restrictions in some jurisdictions, have impacted the welfare of a significant number of seafarers. Ports Australia recommends that the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, the Maritime Union of Australia and the International Transport Workers' Federation be liaised with for further information on these matters to assist with better travel restrictions that allow for the maintenance of seafarer welfare.

Ports Australia welcomes the Australian National Audit Office examination of the effectiveness of the design and management of international travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic; and perceives this an opportunity for the nation to improve on the international travel restrictions posed as well as create frameworks for how industry and government can better collaborate to have positive outcomes in similar situations as this pandemic. Should any further information from a port industry perspective be required, Ports Australia would be pleased to assist.