

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

QUESTION ON NOTICE

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2023 - 2024

Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

Committee Question Number: 296

Departmental Question Number: SQ23-005050

Division/Agency Name: Agency - Australian Transport Safety Bureau

Hansard Reference: Written (02 November 2023)

Topic: ATSB - Chief Commissioner's review of 2021-22

Senator Bridget McKenzie asked:

1. Chief Commissioner 's review 2021–22 states that ATSB 'flagged our ongoing concern about collisions between trading ships and small vessels on the Australian coast' following an incident in February 2020. What additional actions have been taken to mitigate the risk of these collisions?
2. In 2021-22 the ATSB failed to meet the performance criterion that '85% of safety issues [are] addressed in the previous financial year'. Given that only 74% of safety issues were addressed in 2021-22, what needs to happen to meet this performance criterion?
3. In 2021-22 the ATSB missed its target median times to complete short (8 months), defined (16 months) and systemic (22 months) investigations. How can ATSB investigations be completed within the target times?
4. Despite a substantial increase in air traffic, the ATSB received approximately \$500,000 less in government funding in 2021-22 compared to 2020-21. Did this impact the agency's functions?

Answer:

1. There were three collisions between trading ships and small vessels between 2015 and 2018 and a further collision between a fishing boat and bulk carrier on 29 February 2020 (investigated by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) as MO-2020-001). That investigation (and others previously) highlighted the importance of maintaining an adequate look out and the value of surveillance technology to increase traffic awareness. The ATSB continues to monitor such occurrences and notes that there have not been any collisions related to inadequate look out over the last few years.
2. The ATSB is a 'no-blame' safety investigator and does not have any power to enforce the addressing of safety issues identified during ATSB investigations. However, the ATSB does work with safety issue owners to encourage appropriate safety actions, both during an investigation and afterwards. Some safety issues take time to address, especially when new regulations are involved. As such, safety issues will continue to be addressed in later years. For 2021-22 this particular measure was not met as a number of safety issues identified in that year rolled over into 2022-23 where they were addressed. This is reflected in the 2022-23 ATSB Annual report which shows that for the 2021-22 year, 85 per cent of safety issues had been addressed.

3. The ATSB has been actively targeting the performance of investigation times, and this is reflected in the 4-year decreasing median for Short and Defined investigations shown in the 2022-23 ATSB Annual Report. Measures in place are restricting the number of active investigations to an average of two per investigator, adherence to a project management approach to investigations, and an even distribution of investigations across three directors. In 2023, the ATSB strategic plan led to a dedicated Short investigation team (to conduct the majority of office-based short investigations), and a dedicated Data Recovery team, Safety Analysis and Research, Marine investigation team and Rail investigation team. While there will always be some variability in the length of investigations depending on complexity (especially the larger systemic investigations), the above measures are expected to continue to reduce the median time of investigations in the forthcoming years.
4. To ensure, as far as practicable, that the ATSB can resource the investigations it takes on, the ATSB limits the number of investigations to an average of two per investigator (although investigators work across multiple investigations). With the ATSB's present resourcing this accommodates approximately 90 investigations a year across aviation, marine and rail. There are currently no budget measures associated with industry growth, however the Australian Government provided an additional \$4.6 million in the 2023-24 Budget (in addition to its ordinary annual appropriation) to allow ATSB to retain a staffing base of 110 ASL and conduct safety investigations across all modes of transport within its remit. The Government has commissioned a *Review of Operations and Financial Sustainability of Australia's Transport Safety and Investigatory Bodies*, announced in the 2023-24 Budget, which is expected to make recommendations to Government relating to agency resourcing.