**Host:** Welcome to detect and protect the Australian Biosecurity Podcast. This series is about sharing information on biosecurity and the difference this makes to our lives. Every year, lots of animals and plants are imported into Australia, and they have to meet strict biosecurity conditions when they arrive in Australia. These animals and plants spend a bit of time in our post entry quarantine facility in Victoria. The team, at the PEQ facility, play a vital role, ensuring that our import conditions are met and what's imported isn't going to pose a biosecurity risk.

Today, we'll be learning more about what the team does, why their work is so important and some of the interesting things that they've encountered. Joining me today is Megan from the Post Entry Quarantine Facility. Thanks for joining us, Meaghan.

So the first and I suppose the biggest question is what is post entry quarantine and why is it so important for our biosecurity?

**Meaghan:** Post entry quarantine, is essentially a period of time that animals and plants after they've arrived in Australia undergo so that we can get the necessary tests and checks so they've met their permit conditions and the onshore arrival condition.

**Host:** Lots of different animals get imported into Australia all the time. What are the main types of animals that you see coming through the PEQ facility?

**Meaghan:** The main types of animals we see are cats and dogs. We have horses, birds, chickens and ducks and occasionally pigeons and bees.

**Host:** So Australia has got very strict conditions for animal imports, including cats and dogs. And presumably the bulk of these animals are people's pets. Why are the conditions so strict

**Meaghan:** Mostly because of the diseases that are quite common overseas, that we don't have here, and we don't really want here. Imagine an Australia where we have rabies and it got out into our native population, and we couldn’t rescue kangaroos or koalas. Stray dogs on the street, and there's so many other diseases that could potentially come in – Our EI outbreak.

**Host:** That's the equine influenza, isn't it?

**Meaghan**: Yes. Yes, that has potential to decimate our racing industry if it comes here. It goes to our way of life. We have a very relaxed way of life here, and I think if we had a lot of the diseases that are overseas, it wouldn't be quite so relaxed,

**Host:** for sure. So these are very, very strict, but it's very strict for a very good reason.

Meaghan: Yeah. Then there's also a lot of money that Australia generates through its agricultural industry and our racing industry and tourism. And all of that is tied up with our very unique flora and fauna that could be that could be damaged with any version of these types of pests or diseases.

**Host:** And it could be even simpler, sort of a way of life, things like not worrying about the dog you see on the street having rabies and, you know, not being concerned you're about to be bitten by a rabid dog and have your life changed for the worse in a very short period of time.

**Meaghan:** Well, yeah, I mean, rabies is an interesting one because the 56,000 people worldwide die of that every year and there is no known treatment once symptoms appear in 99% of cases. So that's that's a big thing to have to live with.

**Host:** Yeah, no. I'd say it is a pretty good reason to keep it out of that country. So previously, the cats and the dogs, they had to stay for quite an extended period of time in PEQ. But now they only need to stay for ten days. What's the story behind that?

**Meaghan**: So in 2012, there was a review conducted over the Post Entry Quarantine process, and essentially they decided that a lot of the tests and stuff that we did, the treatments we performed here in that 30 days would be taken care of offshore through the health certification program with the OIE.

**Host:** And so that means people that are wanting to bring their pets back into the country, if they do a bit of legwork and a bit of paperwork before they arrive, it's going to mean that they can get to see their pets sooner?

**Meaghan:** Yes. So it's not so much that they have the option. They do have to do these offshore tests, but it does shorten that period that they have to stay in quarantine quite significantly.

**Host:** Well, I mean, it's got to be one of the toughest things. I've never had to do it myself, but I can imagine being separated from your fur babies for an extended period of time and potentially on the other side of the country, you know? And it must be, you know, such a relief when they finally get out of Post Entry Quarantine. I'm sure you've seen a number of things and I'm sure you've seen owners reunited with their pets and vice versa. Are there any good stories anything that stands out to you?

**Meaghan:** Releases is an emotionally draining process, but it's actually one of the most rewarding processes that we do at the PEQ. We get to see that reunion over and over again, and it's probably one of the nicest parts of the job is being able to wheel out that pet.

**Host:** Yeah, I'd believe it for sure. It's, you know, sometimes these are people's only companions, these are partners for life. And you know, it's got to be a stressful, stressful time. So as someone who works in this space, I'm going to assume that you're an animal lover. Did you need certain qualifications or experience to get the job down at the at the facility?

**Meaghan:** I didn't. I came from a different unit. I'd previously worked at the airport and also in the commercial import space, as a documents assessor, I love animals, and I think that's probably the main qualification. Getting the job. We have lots of different types of qualifications of people at the PEQ. We've obviously got our horticulturalists and that sort of thing. But also lots of people with animal behavior degrees and backgrounds in shelters and kennels and that sort of thing. But there's also a lot of people like me who just love animals and just want to work with them and have learnt, lots and lots of stuff along the way from people and from the training that we receive, which is probably second to none in the kennel space, and yes I think the main qualification is loving animals.

**Host:** That makes sense. And you know, it's a common thread we’re finding, a couple of episodes ago, we interviewed the detector dog handlers and that was, I think, their primary criteria as well. They're both dog lovers and animal lovers, and they both said that, you know, the job is rewarding, not just because of the specific quarantine and biosecurity training, but because they get to work with these animals. And, you know, they're their partners. And it seems to be a consistent thread. I'm sure our listeners are maybe aware of a little while ago, a fairly well-known celebrity got in trouble for not following the right conditions when bringing their dogs into Australia. Have we had any celebrity pets come through potentially quarantine because the rules apply to anyone, it doesn't matter how many movies you have starred in. It doesn't matter where you're coming from. The rules still apply.

**Meaghan:** Yes, so we have had some celebrity pets come through. Unfortunately, I cannot name them because of privacy. Although I did have one I can mention, we had Kate Walsh recently during COVID moved to Australia to sunny Western Australia. She brought her animals Pablo and Rosie and we had the pleasure of looking after them and recently saw that they’ve settled in beautifully. But it's not just people who are celebrities. We actually have seen animal celebrities that come through every year. Every year we have what we call the Shadwell Stallions, which means they come on to the breeding season. And this year we have two Triple Crown winners. I must say I get a little bit starstruck with it, with the Shadwell Stallion, sometimes because they are quite famous names.

**Host:** You get a wide variety of things when you work in the field of biosecurity. That's that's for sure. We've we've covered the cats and the dogs. We've talked about horses, live plants. Are there certain plants that need to go through post entry quarantine and why?

**Meaghan**: So there's approximately about 1000 different species that need to come through the PEQ things like grape, potatoes a lot of fruit species, berry crops, ornamentals, forestry species. There's about 1000 species. And the reason they need to come through is because they’re the subject to high risk pests and they need to be grown out in a secure facility to make sure that they're not harbouring those diseases.

**Host:** Sure. And a lot of these days where their access to online stores, people who are interested in, you know, you've mentioned grapes, you've mentioned a range of popular plants, things that backyard gardeners, not just farmers, not just people in the agriculture sector. Backyard farmers and hobbyists are interested in this kind of thing, but it's important that they realize that we take these things into post entry quarantine to let the plants grow so that we can test and screen them for disease, and they've got to understand that the good deal that they see online may end up costing a lot more for them. And the risk is that it costs the Australian economy a lot more than that as well.

**Meaghan**: Yeah. Well, Australia's agricultural industry generates about $29 billion worth of income every year, and 63,000 people rely on it for their job. And if the wrong thing gets out, that can cause a lot of damage.

**Host:** Absolutely. And the next question I suppose I had and it does, does relate to this because we're talking high risk and important, important industry, important sector and a very iconic animal. I understand we've recently imported some bees for the first time in about 15 years. How are bees imported first of all and why they imported?

**Meaghan:** Yeah, so they they come in in little boxes, screens for not particularly luxurious accommodation, but effective and essentially so the two queens that were recently imported came from the Netherlands and they are Varroa resistant genetic. So the hope is that they will then generate offspring that will be resistant to the varroa mite and while varroa mite isn’t currently in Australia the danger is always there.

**Host:** we are one of the last countries in the world not to have varroa and there's no cure. There's no way to get rid. Once Varroa destructor is here, it's very unlikely that we'd ever be able to get rid of it. So it makes sense that we're, first of all, not importing any bees at all to make sure that it doesn't come that way. And importing bees for research makes perfect sense as well, because there's no country has ever managed to eradicate it. And it's a pretty gruesome little bug.

**Meaghan:** And we rely on bees for so many things, the pollination about fruit crops, and they're just they're essential to life.

**Host:** Exactly. Yeah, absolutely. And so we've got queen bees from the Netherlands. We've got superstar horses, we've got celebrities dogs, we've got people's cats. What's the strangest or most interesting if those didn't count that you've seen come through the facility?

**Meaghan**: had recently a what they call a mammoth donkey from the US

**Sam:** A mammoth donkey?

**Meaghan:** It's a horse size donkey so they can be 16 hands, which is quite large for a donkey. And he had ears that I'm pretty sure NASA we're using to pick up signals from Mars. They were huge. And his breigh could be heard all over the facility. It would be down in dogs or security, and you could hear him breighing. It's so loud and everyone knew what he was about to start breighing because he would inhale his mouth would open up wide. And it was odd because then the very next consignment we had, were miniature donkeys, which we're about the same size as the Labrador.

**Host:** Well, you know, like I was saying before, I think, you know, part of the interest part of the satisfaction of working in the field of biosecurity isn't just protecting Australia's environment and the economy, it's just the things that you see on an almost daily basis that most other people don't, don't see or even think about.

**Meaghan:** Yeah. And I mean, it's not even just the interesting animals like the donkeys. We even have so many weird and wonderful cats and dogs that come through. We had a cat, um, a while ago who ate spinach. It wouldn't eat, and the owner said try spinach, she likes spinach and I happen to have spinach, a bag of spinach with my lunch that day and I gave her some and it was like, Oh, thank God, dinner’s here.

**Host:** You know, when I get home this evening, I'm going to try and feed my cat some spinach and we'll see how it goes. I'll let you know.

**Meaghan:** And I mean, yeah, people’s pets, people spoil them so they eat all sorts of interesting things, but that that's probably the strangest thing, cat eating spinach.

**Host:** Now that's certainly the strangest thing that I've heard today. So that's the key overview, I suppose, and the more curious things that you come across. But the PEQ facility isn't just about processing animals and plants. There's a lot of innovation and research work going on down there as well. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about that?

**Meaghan:** Yeah. So the plants space is where probably the most interesting innovation is going on. It's colloquially known as PICATPEQ, which stands for Plant Innovation at Post Entry Quarantine. So the plant guys are looking at new ways of testing to try and shorten the amount of time the plants need to spend in quarantine and finding new ways of getting the plants through in a better term. So, yeah, they're trying to they're trying to reduce it from a two to three year period to six to twelve month period.

**Host:** That sounds like it would be, yeah, absolutely a massive time gain and in line, I suppose, with the reduction at the time that the animals, the cats and dogs have to spend here as well. I guess it's a good demonstration that we are aware that it can be difficult for a variety of reasons to send your loved ones or your nursery stock to this facility and where you are taking steps to reduce the burden on the importers as well as us. And so if any of our listeners are considering importing plants or bring their pets to Australia, what's the take-home message for them that you'd like to give today?

**Meaghan:** I think probably the biggest thing we'd like people to know is that, as demonstrated by COVID, our lifestyle and our economic health and our environment can be damaged by pests and diseases. And while the process can often be hard and confusing and long, it's not for nothing. It is for a purpose. It is so that we can protect our very unique flora and fauna, our way of life and our economic stability, and from an animal person's perspective. People just need to always remember that we love them like their our own, and we're doing our best to protect Australia from all the nasties that the rest of the world seem to have and we don't want.

**Host:** Well, it makes a lot of sense when you put it like that, and I think it's fair to say. Well, thanks, Meaghan. We're about out of time, but this has been a fascinating chat. We really appreciate you taking the time. We appreciate the work that you and your team down there do. So thanks very much for coming along.

**Meaghan:** Thank you for having me.

**Host:** So thanks to Meaghan again, and thanks to our listeners for tuning into the podcast. You can find more information on Australian biosecurity on the department's website or by visiting Biosecurity.act.gov.au A few links and details will be in the description of this episode. Make sure you subscribe to our podcast to get updates on future topics and learn more about Australian biosecurity. Thanks for listening, and we'll catch you again soon.