



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
ABC News24 with Lyndal Curtis

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E&OE

Subjects: New Zealand apple imports, Doha trade round, Craig Thomson.

LYNDAL CURTIS: The Federal Government today lifted restrictions on the importation of New Zealand apples into Australia. This has been a very long-thought decision, particularly by Australian farmers. Why has it been taken?

CRAIG EMERSON: It's a decision of the World Trade Organization. We are a member of the World Trade Organization and we benefit from the world trading rules. And we've actually taken action against other countries that have tried to limit our exports into them, valued at up to \$200 million, a number of our victories. So, to be in the world trading system you need to comply with the decisions of it. And the decision was taken in November of last year that Australia's system was not based properly on science and it needed to be brought into line.

CURTIS: Can you absolutely guarantee that diseases that affect New Zealand apples that Australian farmers have been worried about won't be imported?

EMERSON: Well, I think it can be assured that all of the necessary measures that any reasonable scientific assessment would require will be applied. And those measures will be set down in the decision that has been made by independent officials in Australia from Biosecurity Australia, at arm's length from Government. And it's important that these decisions are made by experts, not at the whim of politicians. And, frankly, that's what the WTO found: that our system was not based properly

on science. And this has been going on for 70 years - that is when we first started in dispute with New Zealand. So the experts have brought down this judgement to implement the World Trade Organization's decision and that does require strict adherence to necessary quarantine measures to make sure that we aren't importing any diseases.

CURTIS: There will also be an economic cost won't there, to Australian apple growers. Because they'll have competition from New Zealand?

EMERSON: Well, there'll be an economic cost if we don't do this. Because New Zealand can retaliate and apply tariffs of up to 100 per cent on our exports of any products to New Zealand, but would be more likely pick on agricultural products to be in the same stable, if you like. And we export lots of agricultural produce to New Zealand. They can apply tariffs of 100 per cent. They can also do it, by the way, on chocolate produced in Tasmania. So the retaliatory capacity of New Zealand in these circumstances where we completely thumb our noses at the World Trade Organisation would be very great, and we would have innocent farmers producing other products caught in the crossfire.

CURTIS: How closely will Australian quarantine services monitor the apples coming in from New Zealand?

EMERSON: Very closely, and it will be actually assessed over in New Zealand. And, of course, there will be close monitoring - of course there will. I mean, New Zealand doesn't go around willy-nilly exporting disease-ridden apples. This is an advanced country that is going to enter the Australian market. There are seasonal differences; I'm not saying there won't be competition. There is likely to be competition, but just as our apple producers and our cherry producers and producers of lamb want to be able to export into markets, that's what New Zealand wants to be able to do. And, you know, people talk about the cost of living, and we understand why they would. Well, this may help ease the cost of living ever so slightly through the importation of New Zealand apples. And, if people don't like New Zealand apples, if they think they're too expensive, well they won't buy them.

CURTIS: The head of the World Bank Bob Zoellick was out here yesterday

EMERSON: Yeah, I met him yesterday actually, yeah.

CURTIS: He had a press conference with the Treasurer. They were talking about international food shortages, food inflation and the troubles in the world economy. They said one of the best

solutions would be to restart the global trade talks. How realistic an option is that?

EMERSON: This is a discussion that I had with Bob Zoellick. He actually was instrumental in setting up this current Doha Round all those years ago in 2001. It's now a full decade and we haven't really made any substantial progress. But Bob is right, and that is the best way to ensure that food prices are contained is to allow the market to seek out those parts of the world that are best at producing the food. And what that means is there's more food and therefore lower prices. That's good not only for Australia, but it's good for the poorest people on earth. You know that one billion people - one billion people - around the world go to bed hungry every night. And we're going to have another two and a half billion people on this earth by 2050. And I think this food security issue is going to be one of the defining issues of the 21st Century.

CURTIS: If I could ask you a domestic political question: the Federal Opposition today has stepped up the pressure on one of the Labor MPs, Craig Thomson, over allegations of use of a union credit card to pay for escort services. He has denied using a union credit card to pay for escort services, and says that another man has since paid back that money. Should he name that person to clear all the allegations that are being made?

EMERSON: There is no allegation of criminality against Craig Thomson. That's what Mr Thomson has said. Why would we not accept his word on that? That if those services were used, they weren't used by Craig Thomson. So what is the actual allegation against Mr Thomson? And is the Coalition saying that Mr Thomson is wrong, is not telling the truth about that? I haven't heard them say that and I hope they don't say that.

CURTIS: So you think Julia Gillard is right to express her full confidence, as she has done in the Parliament, about Mr Thomson?

EMERSON: Yes, I do. And I know Craig Thomson well. He is a very important contributor within the Parliament, both within the Labor side in our internal Caucus committee processes but also in the Parliamentary committee processes.

CURTIS: Craig Emerson, thank you very much for your time.

EMERSON: Thanks very much, Lyndal.