

ALL OF GOVERNMENT ADVICE ON INTRODUCING BORDER RESTRICTIONS RELATING TO COVID-19 FOR THE US AND EUROPE

Summary

1. The World Health Organisation has today declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. This is partly in response to a significant increase in the number of places of concern in recent days. In the past 13 weeks, the number of cases of COVID-19 outside China has increased 13 fold and the number of countries has tripled. These places with identified spread include Europe and the US which both have a significant population and transit with New Zealand, which has consequently increased the risk of importation of COVID-19 to New Zealand.
2. Ministers asked if our borders remain as open as they are now, is there a risk that current people flows to New Zealand could precipitate more cases and fuel early stages of epidemic here. We understand that Ministers are considering whether to move to stronger border measures for travellers from or through the US and Europe, by designating these areas as Category 1B (expecting all travellers, including New Zealanders, to self-isolate on arrival for 14 days).
3. Officials consider that given the materiality and complexity of this decision, a number of matters need further work in the next 24 hours before Ministers take a decision to impose these restrictions on the US and Europe.

Border measures buy New Zealand time to prepare for, contain and manage the peak of outbreak

4. As of 12 March 2020, there are 5 confirmed cases, 2 probable cases and 350 negative cases of COVID-19 in NZ, with 19 under investigation. At this time, with very few cases in New Zealand the main challenge is to ensure New Zealand is prepared to manage and contain spread of COVID-19 in New Zealand.
5. Our current border measures are based on the precautionary principle, aimed at slowing but not stopping the spread of the virus (ie flattening the curve). This buys us time to maximise health system readiness in light of best practice and learn lessons from other countries, and ensure more general workforce and workplace readiness and continuity planning.
6. We achieve this through:
 - Prohibiting travel for non-New Zealanders from areas of highest concern and requiring self-isolation for others arriving in New Zealand (Category 1A),
 - Expecting self-isolation for all travellers (including New Zealanders) from areas of concern, where we have low confidence in their health systems to control and manage the virus' spread (Category 1B), and
 - Keeping watch and informing travellers of further areas with increasing risk (Category 2).
7. The New Zealand health system is continuing to prepare itself and is well prepared to respond to an outbreak in New Zealand. However, further border closures would allow the public health system more time to prepare further. This could include:
 - training further health workforce
 - scaling up contact tracing capacity
 - public messaging
 - scaling up New Zealand's direct resources required such as capacity to look after patients that require ventilation or other health resources

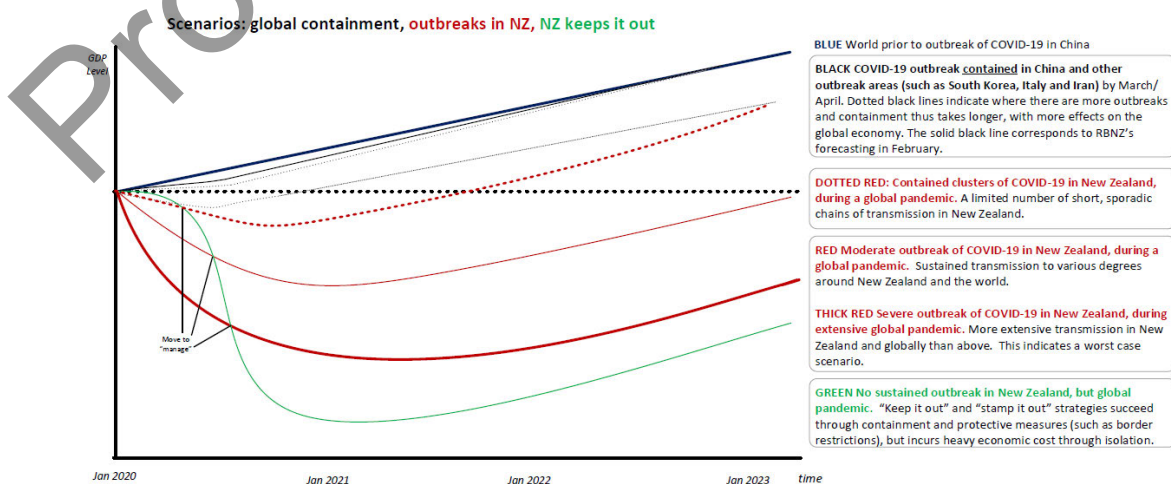
8. The Ministry of Health is also continuing to invest in its response through containment measures including contact tracing, testing and other measures. This includes:
- Communicating with New Zealanders about the risks and how they can protect themselves – this is everybody's business;
 - Finding, isolating, testing and treating every case and trace every contact;
 - Ready our health system;
 - Protecting and training our health workers.

Conditions to trigger stronger border restrictions

9. There is a point where screening at the border and current border measures may not be enough. We consider one trigger for stronger border restrictions across the board would be a more widespread outbreak and a greater percentage of the populations being infected in those key transit routes with direct flights to New Zealand.
10. These conditions have not yet been met for the US and Europe. At the moment, a very small percentage of the US and European populations is infected, although growing rapidly, and while there are some outbreaks occurring, these are small in their overall context. However, questions are being asked about whether they are now seeing widespread community transmission. By the time there is a clear cut case for border restrictions to be imposed, it may be too late.
11. The case to move hard and early on stronger border restrictions is predicated on public health grounds and the precautionary principle: that the risk of importing further cases and risking exponential growth can be deferred. This needs to be balanced against the very significant and enduring negative economic, relationship, and wider consequences of such a decision, including for supply chains for essential goods (eg medicines) to New Zealand and the Pacific.

Consequences of imposing restrictions on travellers from the United States or Europe

12. We are reaching a critical decision point for our border. Implementing border restrictions at a very large scale could make the difference in our long term economic pathway. There is a tipping point, where your decisions at the border will either put New Zealand on a trajectory that:
- a. manages the public health risk effectively (containing clusters of outbreak in New Zealand), while supporting the economy to bounce back rapidly (red dotted line), or
 - b. isolates New Zealand from the world and results in a shock to our economy which has deep and long lasting adverse impacts, including on wellbeing (green line).



13. Health officials advise that further border restrictions would allow the system to continue and strengthen its preparations to date and be well placed to respond to an outbreak. However, while some aspects of the health system would benefit from more time to prepare, there would also be costs directly to the public health system eg diverting scarce resources to support large-scale self-isolation for arriving travellers.
14. From a wider perspective, there are two critical consequences that would need to be managed if Ministers wish to impose restrictions on the US and Europe (or other key transit routes like the Middle East).
 - **The continuing viability of air routes.** Although designating these areas as Category 1B does not prohibit travel, it acts as a deterrent. Visitors have no realistic prospect of self-isolating for 14 days and therefore do not travel. We have seen all direct air routes from Korea shut down as a direct result of this same measure, as they are no longer financially viable for New Zealand travellers only. We are dependent on air routes for supply of essential and time-sensitive supplies, such as medicines and PPE. Once closed, they may not reopen. The impact of limiting travel from Europe may affect the viability also of Asian transit routes.
 - **The impacts of large-scale self-isolation in New Zealand.** Every traveller would be expected to self-isolate for 14 days, including New Zealanders. We need to be sure the public health system is positioned to support this. There would be an opportunity cost in diverting resources from health system preparations for COVID-19. This would create widespread disruption to workplaces, services and families.
15. Officials are working through advice on whether and how this could be achieved. Our initial assessment this evening of imposing border restrictions, including Category 1B, on the US and Europe is that the following scenario would likely eventuate:
 - Airlines would not continue to fly these routes without Government financial support as they would not be financially viable. Commercial Information
[REDACTED]
 - Commercial Information
[REDACTED]
 - It would be difficult for New Zealand citizens to get home unless they could get to the Air New Zealand ports listed in bullet one above, as it is unlikely other airlines would continue to fly to New Zealand from those locations. Many of our transit routes from Asia also rely on travellers transiting from Europe and would be impacted.
 - Once airlines do not fly here, many may retrench and not come back, with lasting impacts on tourism and the economy.
 - Freight could come from ports that Air NZ could fly to listed in bullet one above and current limited dedicated freight services (most freight comes by passenger flights now). Other air freight would find it difficult to reach NZ in a timely manner. Most air freight is time sensitive (and not substitutable for sea freight), this includes crucial pharmaceuticals (64% of which come by air freight).

- International relations
- Any decision would need to be taken in concert with decision making on cruise-ship arrivals – since it may automatically trigger a position of ‘cannot pull alongside or allow to clear immigration and disembark’ given inability to self-isolate.
- A sudden border closure may precipitate a culture of fear and reactive behaviours eg panic-buying among the public in New Zealand

16. This potential scenario presents significant risks which need to be worked through before a decision is taken by Ministers, to ensure they can be managed to acceptable levels.

17. Officials therefore advise that Ministers ask for further advice before making a decision on whether to designate the US and Europe as Category 1B, including on how to:

- Keep essential air routes open. This is to ensure essential and time sensitive goods can arrive by air (eg medicines and PPE supplies) and New Zealanders can arrive home.
- Maintain goods arriving by sea. We are reliant on these for essential goods for day to day consumption and to respond to COVID-19. Even if you choose not to ban cargo, there is a signalling effect which would impact on current routes and frequency. We need to work through whether shipping companies would start constraining routes to New Zealand.
- Maintain supplies to the Pacific. Firstly to help them prepare for COVID-19, which includes access for essential people and supplies. Secondly, as one of their main transit points to the rest of the world. This means working carefully through what any restrictions mean for their health systems and economic situation.
- Manage labour market and income security outcomes and workplace continuity. A sudden shift in travel restrictions is likely to result in thousands more workers recently returned from overseas either being required or perceiving they need to self-isolate, impacting on staffing of workplaces across New Zealand and a significant burden on public health services to support them.
- Manage people flows to repatriate foreign nationals and New Zealanders. There will be large numbers of foreign nationals stuck in New Zealand, and New Zealanders stuck overseas unable to access the necessary support and separated from families and homes, for an extended period of time.
- Have an exit strategy. We need a clear timeframes and rationale for when we could lift the border closure. A short term closure could potentially be justified in certain circumstances, although we do not consider these are presently met. However, those conditions would be likely to last for many months.
- Implementation and communication plan. Any closure would need to be managed in a sequenced and careful way, to minimise the operational cost and complexity involved, our relationships with foreign countries, and our reputation (responsible and planned closure not a sudden reaction to the WHO announcement).