

## **Industry body strategic plan for COVID-19 vaccination of workers in the meat industry**

**7 April 2021**

### **Rationale**

COVID-19 vaccination has commenced in Australia. The Commonwealth Department of Health has developed a national COVID 19 vaccination policy, with operational responsibility for the roll out largely resting in the hands of State Health Departments and Local Authorities. The national policy envisages that the vaccination programme will be implemented in phases as vaccines become available, commencing with population groups at highest risk and essential workers, and proceeding to cover the entire adult population.

Workers in the meat processing industry have been identified as a population group at higher risk of COVID-19 disease, based on the experience of outbreaks associated with meat processing facilities in several countries. Under the Australian national COVID-19 vaccination policy, workers in the meat processing industry are specifically included among the priority groups eligible for vaccination in Phase '1b' of the vaccine roll out. <sup>1</sup>

There is strong interest in the issue of vaccination for workers in the industry across a wide spectrum, from the workers themselves through to individual enterprises and representative groups, and to industry bodies and trade unions. It is very much in the interests of both workers and industry to ensure a healthy workforce and healthy workplace environments, and in the interest of the wider community to ensure the best possible level of protection for this high-risk group.

Accordingly, industry bodies have been working with expert advisers (Respond Global), industry stakeholders, and health authorities to develop a plan for the industry that offers the best opportunities for workers to be vaccinated.

### **Consultation with stakeholders**

Various individual consultations with industry stakeholders and health authorities have taken place during the month of March, culminating in a virtual meeting with some key industry stakeholders on Wednesday 31 March, to discuss the basic principles and proposed objectives of an industry plan. Feedback from these consultations and the meeting has been incorporated in the current version of the plan.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/getting-vaccinated-for-covid-19/when-will-i-get-a-covid-19-vaccine?gclid=Cj0KCQiApsiBBhCKARIsAN8o\\_4j4qT9xK1hYZj13RtwGE6RiliqPxHKd4qwnigc6kHjuxFxwo wFmS4oaAsMyEALw\\_wcB](https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/getting-vaccinated-for-covid-19/when-will-i-get-a-covid-19-vaccine?gclid=Cj0KCQiApsiBBhCKARIsAN8o_4j4qT9xK1hYZj13RtwGE6RiliqPxHKd4qwnigc6kHjuxFxwo wFmS4oaAsMyEALw_wcB)

## Current situation and uncertainties

At the time of writing, there still many uncertainties surrounding the details of the vaccination process for meat industry workers, which make it difficult to establish a single definitive solution for ensuring access to vaccination for all workers. Proposed processes for vaccinating meat workers in Phase 1b appear to vary state by state, and even within states in the areas under the responsibility of local health authorities, depending on state and local strategies and capacities. **It is increasingly clear, however, that individual enterprises will need to actively engage with local and state health authorities to identify solutions for immunization of their workers.**

Some enterprises across the country have already succeeded in identifying specific solutions for the vaccination of their workers. However, many enterprises have not yet identified a satisfactory solution. **It is critical for the industry to work together with all interested parties as early as possible to try to identify effective options for vaccination.** This plan has been prepared in response to the need for action and the demands of workers and enterprises in the industry.

## Purpose of this plan

Notwithstanding the current uncertainties, this plan is intended:

- To offer options and a framework to all interested parties in the meat industry that will inform their interactions with health authorities and facilitate a high uptake of COVID-19 vaccine by meat industry workers
- to facilitate communication with health authorities at federal, state, and local level and to engage them in identifying appropriate solutions for achieving a high level of vaccination coverage of industry workers
- to define the different options that may exist for workers to access vaccination, and broadly sketch out how each of these options could be used to ensure the best possible access
- to ensure close coordination between all interested parties in the industry and the wide sharing of information and experiences
- to support industry bodies, individual enterprises, and employee organizations to develop effective two-way communication with industry workers on the importance of vaccination, provide answers to the questions which workers may have, and ultimately to provide information on when and how workers can access vaccination

## Objective of the plan:

The overall objective of this plan is to ensure that workers in the meat industry are effectively protected against COVID-19 disease, that workplaces remain safe and healthy, and that the broader community benefits from a meat industry free of COVID-19.

In order to achieve this, the following specific objectives are set:

- By the end of April 2021, all enterprises with eligible workers will have communicated with responsible health authorities to identify appropriate ways for workers to access vaccination
- In the Industry as a whole, *at least 80%* of all eligible workers will be fully immunized by the end of October 2021<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This date may change as this plan was drafted prior to the recent advice related to AstraZeneca and the potential impact on accessing vaccination supply in Australia.

## Vaccination options for meat industry workers

In discussion with health authorities and industry stakeholders, three main potential options have been identified to give access to vaccination for industry workers:

- **Vaccination on site by accredited COVID-19 vaccination service providers.** This option is most feasible for enterprises with larger numbers of workers, although exact numbers that would make sense to vaccination providers may vary depending on the circumstances. This option would require responsible health authorities to identify accredited providers capable of delivering mobile or in-reach services (these accredited providers could be either from the State or local health authority itself, or external providers who have been accredited by Federal or State health authorities). It would also require each facility using these services to develop operational plans for vaccination sessions, in conjunction with the service provider.
- **Specific arrangements with fixed site vaccination providers.** This option may be attractive to a range of industry enterprises, including those with medium to low numbers of workers. This would involve negotiating specific days or times when meat industry workers from an enterprise would have special vaccination sessions at local health authority facilities or private provider facilities (e.g., GP practices/accredited pharmacies) depending on capacity.
- **‘Standard’ processes under which individual workers would obtain vaccination session appointments with accredited providers.** This option puts most of the onus on workers themselves to make appointments with local vaccination providers. Some states are moving towards specific identifiers (e.g., QLD ‘organization codes’) for each enterprise that would allow workers to quote these identifiers when making an appointment; the identifier would designate the worker as being eligible for vaccination under Phase 1b. Access to appointments would in this situation be dependent on availability of vaccination ‘slots’ in the schedules of the individual providers.

## Identifying and implementing the best options and key remaining issues

- Interactions with State Health Authorities have reinforced the need for *enterprises to be proactive and to reach out to their responsible local health authorities* to discuss what options for vaccination of workers might be available and to map out how and when workers can access vaccination.
- It is clear from industry consultations that the *preferred solution for most enterprises with significant numbers of workers is for vaccination to be offered on-site*. This would be operationally easier and would more likely lead to a higher uptake of vaccination by industry workers. However, this solution may not be available for every enterprise given different sizes, situations, geographic locations, and capacity of local health authorities, and also potential issues of *access to registered providers* who can provide on-site services.
- *While industry will seek to promote on-site vaccination solutions as much as possible, it is likely that a mosaic of solutions will be needed to ensure that workers in every enterprise have access to vaccination*. The second and third options outlined above will also need to be explored by enterprises and health authorities to identify what is feasible if on-site vaccination cannot be achieved.

- *For workers without Medicare numbers, which may include many non-citizen workers on work visas, special solutions may be needed; options are being discussed with Federal and State health authorities to identify solutions to enable these workers to access vaccination.*
- *While vaccine will be provided free of charge, enterprises will likely need to allocate resources for the vaccination process, for example to cover on site immunization costs, or transport costs for workers, and for communication activities with workers*
- *In all cases, communication with workers will be critical to ensure that their questions are addressed, that they understand how they can access vaccination, and that their uptake of vaccination will be as high as possible. Specific efforts will be needed to ensure that materials and processes are available to engage workers in two-way discussions to reinforce their commitment to vaccination.*

### **Actions under this plan:**

In light of the above issues and options, with the support of Respond Global, Industry Bodies will:

- Facilitate direct contact with State Health Authorities in every state to ensure coordination with these authorities on vaccination solutions for meat industry workers
- Through State Health Authorities, identify appropriate contact people within state and local health sectors who are responsible for the vaccine roll out, and provide that information to members to ensure that all enterprises can initiate contact with health authorities to identify the vaccination options that may be available in each area
- Work with State Health Authorities to identify accredited vaccination providers who are appropriate to provide on-site vaccination services to enterprises with adequate numbers of eligible workers, and provide that information to enterprises
- Coordinate with State and Federal Health Authorities on vaccination solutions for workers without Medicare numbers, and provide information on these solutions to industry enterprises as it becomes available
- Identify appropriate and effective communications materials and processes for workers in the industry and for their representatives and enterprise management, and make this information available to industry members through websites and direct communication
- As required and requested, work with individual enterprises and expert advisers to ensure that each has an appropriate communications and vaccination plan in place, detailing the identified vaccination solution; the channels of communication with workers, their representatives, and other stakeholders; the schedule of the vaccination process; and the flow of information on the process and results
- Facilitate regular communications across the industry to share experience and best practices

### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

Industry bodies will monitor the progress of implementation of this plan on a monthly basis, in coordination with State Health Authorities and other stakeholders, and will provide a short-written feedback to all stakeholders at the end of each month. Industry bodies will interact with member enterprises on a monthly basis to ensure that they have been able to establish contact with relevant health authorities, that vaccination solutions appropriate to the enterprises and workers have been

identified, and to identify any issues that members may be encountering. For any issues that are identified, industry bodies (supported by Respond Global) will engage with health authorities and stakeholders to help identify appropriate solutions. An interim evaluation report will be prepared at the end of July 2021 and a final report at the end of October.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that high vaccination coverage of meat workers will be of great benefit to the workers themselves, to individual enterprises, to the meat industry, and to the community as a whole. Ensuring that workers have access to vaccination will require the engagement of industry bodies, individual enterprises, and other stakeholders to ensure that effective solutions can be found, and close coordination with State and Local Health Authorities is vital. This plan offers a broad roadmap for engaging industry, health authorities, and other stakeholders to achieve effective vaccination solutions for the meat industry.