

# National firearms register fast-tracked for mid-year launch

MICHAEL MCKENNA  
QUEENSLAND EDITOR

Work on a national firearms register is being fast-tracked so it can be ready mid-year, with plans for police and, possibly, the Family Court to have immediate access to up-to-date records of guns and their licensed owners across the country.

The push for a nationwide register, first agreed to by state and federal governments after the

1996 Port Arthur massacre, was resurrected by Police Federation of Australia president Ian Leavers in the wake of last year's fatal ambush of two police officers in regional Queensland.

Two young constables – Rachel McCrow and Mathew Arnold – as well as neighbour Alan Dare were shot to death by conspiracy theorists Nathaniel, Gareth and Sherry Train when the officers, and two colleagues, went to their remote property at Wiambiilla, 290km west of Brisbane in December.

Nathaniel Train, a NSW school principal who had been reported missing, was a licensed gun owner who it later emerged was wanted after he illegally crossed the border into Queensland during the Covid lockdown with a vehicle full of guns.

In February, national cabinet of the Prime Minister and state and territory chief ministers agreed the register was "necessary", with state police ministers and attorney-general to meet mid-year to discuss options for its implementation.

But police ministers and federal Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus have brought forward their meeting to Monday in Sydney to discuss progress in developing the register, with plans for the model to be ratified in June and ready soon after.

Under plans for the register, police officers will access accurate information "in real time" on firearms and licensed gun owners across the country. It is also proposed the register will give officers the ability to trace firearms from

"creation to destruction in Australia", provide information required to determine licence suitability and include a notification function alerting to the theft of a weapon.

Each state and territory has a firearm registry, which can be accessed by officers in the field, but the information is not shared or available on a nationwide database. The federal government last week also introduced legislation to give the Family Court access to the state registries and, if passed, it is hoped it will be able to use the na-

tional registry to inform judges on who holds gun licences across jurisdictions.

After the shooting in Queensland, Mr Leavers called for the national register, saying police officers could not access information that a person held a gun licence interstate unless a particular request was made to that jurisdiction or it had already been passed on. The Australian Firearms Information Network already exists but is designed to only trace individual firearms.

Mr Leavers, who is also head of the Queensland Police Union, said the register would make it safer for police.

"The reforms I have proposed for the national firearms register will make the job of policing safer, protect the community and stand as a lasting legacy honouring Constables Mathew Arnold and Rachel McCrow," Mr Leavers said from the US.

"Aligning all state databases in a standard format that is clear, without terminology that could be

misinterpreted between different jurisdictions and immediate will be the missing link in the firearms intelligence picture."

In a statement provided to The Australian, Mr Dreyfus said the extraordinary meeting – which he will chair – had been called to advance progress on the register.

"A national firearms register will ensure police across all Australian jurisdictions have timely and accurate information to assess any firearms risk posed, and protect the community from harm."

# TV streaming loophole lets in alcohol ads

EXCLUSIVE

STEPHEN RICE  
NSW EDITOR

Alcohol companies are exploiting a legal loophole to advertise on television when children are watching, as the alcohol advertising watchdog – which is dominated by and entirely funded by the alcohol lobby – claims it is powerless to act.

Under the self-regulatory scheme that is supposed to control alcohol advertising, children can be shown alcohol ads while watching the streaming versions of TV shows at home with their families on the networks' digital platforms.

In recent examples under the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC), Grey Goose vodka ads were allowed to appear on the streamed version of Nine's Today Show and Smirnoff vodka ads during the streamed version of The Voice on 7 Plus, even though the ads are banned during live television broadcasts of the shows.

Several leading public health organisations say ABAC is not doing enough to protect children as a growing number of viewers watch TV through streaming and on-demand platforms.

Many have boycotted an ABAC review of the code, refusing to participate in what some describe as a "sham", designed to shield a body dominated by alcohol industry representatives.

The ABAC review was announced more than a year ago but has yet to publish its findings. ABAC's management committee comprises representatives from the Brewers Association of Australia, Spirits & Cocktails Australia and Australian Grape and Wine – which also jointly fund the organisation – plus one from government and one from the Advertising Council.

Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) chief executive Caterina Giorgi said the self-regulatory system was broken and described ABAC as "a front to avoid the regulation of alcohol marketing".

"There is no independent regulator enforcing the code and there are no penalties for non-compliance," Ms Giorgi said.

The problem was becoming more urgent as the audience for streaming content had already overtaken linear TV and the trend was accelerating, she said.

One family complained to the ABAC that it was watching The Voice, a PG-rated show, with its two young children during dinner at 6pm, when Smirnoff vodka ads suddenly appeared.

Another family said the ad immediately grabbed the attention of its six-year-old daughter.

"She was completely focused on the advertisement. The ima-



The Grey Goose Vodka ad shown on streaming services

gery including the adventurous storyline and catchy tune are enough to make this a particularly attractive and memorable advertisement to my daughter," one parent said.

"My daughter immediately recognises it and sings along to the song in the ad, which has played in every ad break of the show."

Another complainant pointed out The Voice was "a family show with a teen audience – its obvious alcohol should not be advertised".

ABAC dismissed the complaints and found the ad did not breach the current rules, including that alcohol ads only be shown during programming seen by a 75 per cent adult audience.

The panel said ratings data showing that no more than 12 per

cent of the audience was under 18, and that while it "wide appeal, including to minors", nevertheless "the show cannot fairly be said to be aimed primarily at under-18-year-olds".

However, FARE's audience figures did not account for the reality that children were also watching on their parents' streaming accounts.

Complaints by parents about advertisements for Grey Goose vodka during a Christmas episode of LEGO Masters were rejected by ABAC on the grounds that children made up only 17 per cent of the audience, and despite the panel conceding that "alcohol marketing should not be occurring with this program".

Another parent who saw a Grey Goose vodka ad while streaming the Today Show live at 8.30am complained that it appeared just before a segment on the show that involved children, "making it more likely children

would be watching". ABAC rejected the complaint.

"The fact that someone can be watching the Today Show on free-to-air and not see an alcohol ad, but when they view the exact same show via streaming – which a lot more people are doing now – and they do see a vodka ad, shows the significant flaws in alcohol marketing controls," Ms Giorgi said.

"With the emergence of these digital platforms, these codes are left well behind and kids aren't protected at all," she said.

"This is a code that's run by alcohol companies for alcohol companies."

The ABAC panel acknowledged that although 9Now had an age restriction capacity, "in practical terms the account will be held by an adult and the shows will be co-viewed by all people in the household including children".

But it dismissed the complaint about the vodka ad because viewing data showed only 4 per cent of "logged-in users" streaming the show were under 18, and the show was aimed at adults. FARE says the panel had no way of knowing how many children were watching at home with their parents.

Under free-to-air television rules alcohol ads cannot be aired during children's shows and can only be shown on commercial TV between noon and 3pm on school days and between 8.30pm and 5am on any day.

ABAC told The Australian it was a "world leading in relation to responsible alcohol marketing" and denied it was a "sham" or "front" body dominated by the alcohol industry.

ABAC said the chair of its management committee was an independent position, currently held by former parliamentary Speaker Harry Jenkins, and noted that an assistant secretary of the Department of Health was a member of the committee. It said the complaints adjudication process and each of its panelists was independent of industry.

The ABAC code review outline "and a revised code" would be launched next month, it said, but declined to reveal any of the findings of the review.

MEDIA 919

# Salmon industry's secret – hooked on krill



Super-trawler Long Fa fishing for krill off Coronation Island, near the northwest of the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula; and below, Antarctic krill

EXCLUSIVE

MATTHEW DENHOLM  
TASMANIA CORRESPONDENT

Australian salmon producers have confirmed using Antarctic krill in fish feed, as a leading scientist quips the krill industry's expert panel, concluding krill harvesting is "wrong" and should be banned.

Feed producer BioMar Pty Ltd, supplier to major Australian salmon growers, confirmed it used krill meal from Antarctic krill harvester Aker BioMarine.

This is despite growing concern among scientists and conservationists that Antarctic krill harvesting is overly concentrated, encroaching on whale foraging and snarling whales as bycatch.

Australian supermarkets and chemists, as well as consumers, are about to be targeted in a campaign by the Bob Brown Foundation, raising awareness of krill use in Australian salmon farming and health supplements.

The krill fishing regulator – the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources – is under fire for failing to factor into catch limits key issues such as climate change and needs of major krill predators, including whales.

BioMar – backed by key salmon producers Huon Aquaculture and Petuna – defended the use of krill meal in their fish feed. Tassal did not comment.

"Krill meal from Aker BioMarine is an efficient and safe way to deliver a number of essential nutrients from a natural source of prey," said BioMar managing director David Whyte.

"The Antarctic krill fishery is ... one of the best managed and most sustainable fisheries in the world ... and closely regulated by CCAMLR. The krill catch limit is set to well below 1 per cent of the Antarctic krill biomass."

However, a key member on the krill industry's expert panel, lead German marine mammal scientist Helena Herr, has quit in



Antarctic krill

recent days, concluding the industry engages in "greenwashing" and needs to be "banned".

"As a scientist as well as a private person I am convinced that krill fishing is wrong and that a ban of krill fisheries in the Southern Ocean is needed," Dr Herr said in a resignation email.

"I had hoped that the expert panel may have some influence, providing guidance and advice on the design and appropriateness of measures taken to mitigate harmful effects of the krill fishing industry on the Antarctic ecosystem."

"But the limited scope and

focus ... (means) I do not have the feeling that our expertise is sought to improve measures, or even to design measures most appropriate, but solely to legitimise."

Dr Herr had come to believe the krill industry's scheme of voluntary measures was "greenwashing" that was likely to drive fishing into whale foraging areas.

Association of Responsible Krill Harvesting Companies executive officer Javier Arata said Dr Herr's resignation was "unfortunate" but that her departure "should not detract from the importance" of the industry's voluntary restricted fishing zones.

Dr Arata said Dr Herr had not expressed "any specific issues" during her year on the expert panel. "Recent survey data, including research by Helena, proves that humpback and fin whales have made a remarkable recovery since the end of the whaling era, despite concurring krill fishing operations during the past 30-plus years," he said.

The association was "proud of

our voluntary approach to krill management". "CCAMLR would obviously not thank (us) if what we are doing is greenwashing," Dr Arata said. "We fully support CCAMLR's development of new regulations."

Mr Whyte said Aker BioMarine eliminated "almost all by-catch" and had "rigorous" Marine Stewardship Council certification. However, the council has been condemned by conservation groups for certifying krill, a cornerstone species underpinning life in Antarctica.

WWF said it objected to MSC certification for krill fishing. "We highlighted several issues with the current management framework not incorporating climate change into stock assessments, the localised depletion of krill stocks and the subsequent impact on krill predators, and the multi-year delay in updating management measures," WWF's Emily Grilly said.

MSC did not respond by deadline.

# Housing crisis crushes builders

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The climbing insolvency numbers reflect the surging cost pressures and ballooning build times that plunged fixed-price contracts into the red during the pandemic.

They said the picture for the sector looked more positive this year and beyond as these pressures ease and contracts are adjusted to better reflect industry conditions.

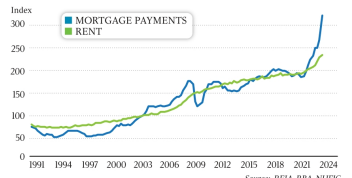
But the shock failures of Melbourne-based Porter Davis on Friday – leaving 1700 homes unbuilt – and school-builder Lloyd Group underlined the ongoing struggles facing some construction companies, particularly those large firms that are trying to work their way out of the massive holes blasted in their balance sheets over the past two years.

The latest ASIC insolvency statistics showed 1447 construction firms have gone under in the financial year to March, against 836 this time last year and the highest since the regulator began publishing the industry-level data in 2013-2014.

About 28 per cent of total company insolvencies throughout this period were in the building sector, against a 10-year average of 20 per cent.

The price of inputs to construction are up nearly 30 per

GROWTH IN MORTGAGE PAYMENTS AND RENT



Source: REIA, RBA, NFFIC

cent versus pre-pandemic levels. Cost inflation growth peaked at 17 per cent last year, steel products 16 per cent, while the cost of concrete, cement and sand climbed 15 per cent, the ABS data shows.

The price of timber jumped 17 per cent last year, steel products 16 per cent, while the cost of concrete, cement and sand climbed 15 per cent, the ABS data shows.

Russ Stephens, the co-founder of the Association of Professional Builders, said construction firms – particularly large ones such as Porter Davis – had accumulated huge losses over the past two years that they were struggling to fill.

"The easing of demand is certainly taking some of the pressure off some of the builders, but the

real issue here is that a lot of the big companies are desperately trying to sign new contracts to shore up their cash flow," Mr Stephens said.

"They need new money coming in to pay creditors – they are essentially robbing Peter to pay Paul. They need high revenues so they can trade their way back, and that could take years."

But Housing Industry Association chief economist Tim Reardon played down a potential wave of insolvencies, saying the figures were not too far above pre-pandemic levels and that conditions in the industry were easing as costs came down.

"Builders tend to go broke on the up cycle, not the down cycle. This is an echo of what happened last year, and we are at the tail end of that cycle," Mr Reardon said.

# Albanese muted on budget tax windfall

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include more "credible" commodity price forecasts, in a move that would add billions to the bottom line over forward estimates.

The report from the department's Office of the Chief Economist says supply disruptions from flooding and the chaos in energy markets unleashed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine would be responsible for this year's record export earnings, which would "easily" surpass last year's equally historic \$422bn.

Exports earnings would retreat sharply in 2023-24, however, to \$378bn, in real terms, "as commodity prices settle back at levels seen before the recent spikes".

The spike in energy commodity prices in 2022 has now largely unwound, "the report says. However, a strong recovery in Chinese economic activity could re-tighten world commodity markets over the next year."

Iron ore exports would drop to \$121bn in this financial year, in real terms, from \$142bn in the last, before falling to \$100bn in 2023-24 and \$74bn by 2027-28.

High prices would drive LNG earnings to \$91bn in 2022-23, or three times the level recorded in 2020-21, while thermal coal ex-

ports would hit \$65bn in this financial year, from just \$16bn two years earlier.

The steepest projected fall was in coal exports, driven by the rapid retreat from record high prices, the report says. Thermal coal earnings would retreat from \$65bn in 2022-23 to \$19bn five years later, while steelmaking coal exports would halve from \$63bn to \$33bn in that time.

"The outlook remains subject to significant uncertainties, linked to geopolitics, war, the global energy transition and weather events," the report says. "But Australia has resources that are central to the global energy transition. Exports of critical minerals, such as lithium, are expected to increase strongly as revenue from coal exports declines."

Lithium exports have tripled since last year and will reach \$19bn this financial year, the report says, before dropping to \$11.8bn in 2023-24 and then retreating back to \$19bn by 2027-28.

Lithium and base metal exports set to equal the value of coal exports by 2027-28. Resources Minister Madeleine King said the report "underlines the importance of our critical minerals sector and Australia's ambition to become a clean-energy superpower."

# Genetic link to mental illness found

JOANNA PANAGOPOULOS

Scientists have confirmed a genetic link for severe psychiatric disorders including depression and schizophrenia, which could lead to the development of new drug treatments.

The international team, led by a University of Wollongong researcher, studied more than 1000 human brains donated to science by people who had lived with mental illness.

The study, published in Acta Neuropathologica, confirmed

what has long been suggested through animal and blood sample studies: that people with mental illness had elevated levels of the FKBP5 gene directly in the brain.

The FKBP5 gene and its associated protein – which is key to how all humans deal with stress – was higher in those with depression and bipolar disorder, but it was particularly strong for people with schizophrenia.

Normally, when FKBP5 levels reach a certain level, the stress response is turned off. But people with mental illness have difficulty turning off this stress response.

Natalie Matosin, Head of UOW's Mental Illness and Disorders of Stress Lab, said that through microscopes and cutting edge molecular techniques, the researchers found the "specific cell type in which FKBP5 is most affected in people with mental illness".

The researchers think FKBP5 may cause some disruption of cognition which means these findings could also help treat "debilitating" cognitive symptoms of people with mental illness.

The ability to learn, remember, reason, process information and pay attention.