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Media release

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Free Trade Agreements - Quarantine Risk

Australia is jeopardising its high standard of quarantine protection, built up over decades, in its rush to sign Free Trade Agreements with the US, China, Thailand and the ASEAN nations according to a new paper released by The Australia Institute.

Trading in Food Safety? by Hilary Bambrick of the Australian National University analyses the threats to quarantine and Australian food safety standards posed by trade agreements.

Citing the devastating consequences for human health of the BSE ('mad cow disease'), avian influenza, and several highly dangerous bacteria, the paper argues that Australia's quarantine regulations should be specifically excluded from trade negotiations and trade dispute settlement processes.

Releasing the paper today Institute Director Dr Clive Hamilton said Australia had made quarantine concessions to the United States in recent negotiations for a free trade agreement with the Americans.

"Australia has always applied the precautionary principle and invoked quarantine when there is a potential risk rather than waiting for the risk to be proved," Dr Hamilton said. "This has served us well and we are relatively free of many agricultural and food-borne diseases.

"Some countries, including trading partners of ours, do not recognise the precautionary principle and consider our approach unnecessarily restrictive of trade. There is a serious danger that responding to this point of view as part of the current free trade mania is going to leave Australians open to diseases that we have in the past been scrupulous to guard against.

"Tragically, this is quite feasible. Australian standards for the Listeria bacteria, which contaminates dairy products and crustacea and is a cause of meningitis and stillbirth, have been reduced due to pressure from importers and industry."

Dr Hamilton said forthcoming free trade negotiations with China and Thailand, and an interest in an agreement with the ASEAN bloc to be discussed in Laos next month, will put further pressure on our quarantine standards.

He said it was hypocritical of the Government to have spent millions of dollars on a recent campaign alerting Australians to the dangers of slack quarantine whilst putting the country at huge risk through bi- and multi- lateral trade agreements that threatened Australia's ability to limit the importation of potentially dangerous foods and agricultural products.