

Brian White Scholarship – 2020

FED: Virus travel ban extension possible

The travel ban preventing Chinese visitors and students from entering Australia may be extended as part of the government's response to the coronavirus, even as financial pressures in the economy mount.

"The current ban extends to this weekend and we will be consider those issues on the best medical advice," Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Thursday, ahead of a meeting of the national security committee.

The virus, now officially known as COVID-19, on top of this summer's bushfires and a long-running drought, is having huge financial impact on the economy, and may even see the government forgo its much-promised budget surplus.

The ramifications are particularly bad for Australia's university sector, which has 68,000 Chinese foreign students locked out because of the travel ban, but the tourism and hospitality sectors also are suffering.

FED: Red tape cut for drought support payments

Farmers will no longer risk accruing federal government debts from welfare overpayments as the coalition moves to simplify the approval criteria.

Agriculture Minister David Littleproud has introduced the underpinning legislation to parliament, which will see the farm household support payment paid based on current income rather than an estimate.

"Predicting income is difficult. Farmers have told us that loud and clear," he said on Thursday.

Under current arrangements farmers receive a rate of payment based on an estimate they make 12 months in advance.

The government then cross checks that with tax office data and either have to pay farmers more, or farmers owe the government money.

The draft legislation would also give farmers longer to undertake a farm financial assessment after receiving a notice from Services Australia, by removing the 28-day time limit.

NSW: Power outages remain after NSW storms

Cyclone Uesi will bring strong winds and powerful surf to the NSW coastline, as thousands of people across the state continue to be without power after the weekend's heavy rainfall and storms.

The NSW Bureau of Meteorology says the tropical cyclone is expected to stay offshore, but warned it will create powerful swells across the state's coast.

A hazardous surf warning has been issued for the Byron Bay coast on Thursday and most of the state's coastline on Friday as the cyclone tracks towards Lord Howe Island.

Island chief executive Peter Adams says residents and visitors are preparing for strong winds to hit the area on Thursday afternoon, with the cyclone to reach the island in the early hours of Friday morning.

"People are calmly preparing," he told the ABC on Thursday.

"Based on experience, people in their homes know what to do."

Rain is forecast for much of the NSW coast on Thursday, with Sydney, the northern tablelands, mid-north coast, Hunter and South Coast to get a drenching.

Flood warnings are in place for the Tweed River at Tumbulgum and the Orara River at Glenreagh.

The NSW State Emergency Service has also warned of minor flooding in the upper Nepean River at Menangle.

Meanwhile, about 25,000 people across Sydney and the Central Coast are still without power after last weekend's record rain and storms.

Many are bracing for more days without power as utility company Ausgrid works to get electricity back to all its customers by the end of the weekend.

"This is a natural disaster, it's the second largest storm in Ausgrid history," chief operating officer Trevor Armstrong told Channel Nine on Thursday.

"We are working hard to have all restored by the end of the weekend."

Ausgrid confirmed it had asked all levels of government for assistance, particularly for tree-clearing services.

Energy provider Endeavour Energy on Wednesday night said less than 50 of its customers were still without power.

It plans to restore power to all homes by Thursday night.

NSW: Sydney postie charged with \$20K cig theft

A former Sydney postal worker has been charged with stealing around \$20,000 worth of cigarettes from mail deliveries.

The 57-year-old man was arrested on January 23 after reports of mail consignments going missing from the Strawberry Hills post office, in inner Sydney.

Police allege four cartons of cigarettes and other items, including camera equipment, were seized from a car and a further 96 cartons of cigarettes were seized from a Waterloo unit.

Officers also took mail consignments containing a printer, barbecue, clothing, a ukelele and other items from the unit.

The man is due to face the Downing Centre Local Court on Thursday charged with six offences.

VIC: Fish smugglers caught at Melbourne airport

Two people have been busted trying to smuggle more than 100 live fish into Australia.

The 122 fish had not been declared before being found in plastic bags filled with water in the duo's luggage at Melbourne Airport.

The bags had been selected for inspection based on intelligence, with the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment and Australian Federal Police involved in seizing the aquatic animals.

Head of Biosecurity Lyn O'Connell said smuggling fish can have significant ramifications.

"Live fish can carry and transmit parasites, bacteria and viruses that could affect our native aquatic wildlife, and our \$3 billion fishing and aquaculture industries," she said.

"They may also be considered a biosecurity pest and be damaging to our unique aquatic environments and ecosystems," said on Thursday.

Authorities cannot reveal where the passengers travelled from while the case is under investigation.

VIC: Banksy artwork auction for Vic fire relief

An original work by renowned street artist Banksy will go under the auctioneer's hammer in Melbourne to raise money for bushfire relief.

Funds from the sale of Banksy's Weston Super Mare will be donated to raise funds for the Victorian government's bushfire appeal.

The artwork is being donated by Victorian art collectors Sandra Powell and Andrew King to the bushfire relief auction they are holding in South Yarra on Sunday.

The exhibition will include almost 100 works from Australian and international street artists such as Rone, Adnate and D*Face donated by a range of artists, collectors and galleries.

"The auction line-up is arguably the most comprehensive and diverse survey of street art ever assembled in Melbourne," Mr King said.

The estimated price for each artwork ranges from \$500 to \$20,000, but Banksy's creation might fetch more.

QLD: Woman missing amid Qld floods warnings

A woman has disappeared in the Gold Coast hinterland amid heavy rain that has prompted flood warnings across Queensland.

Yang Chen, 26, was reported missing about 11am on Wednesday by a man she was walking with near Gorge Falls in the Tallebudgera Valley.

The man told police he lost sight of her and it's not clear whether she got lost, fell or walked out of bushland to nearby roads.

Authorities warn a number of creeks in the area have been affected by recent rainfall and there are concerns for Ms Chen's safety.

Meanwhile, the rain has impacted hundreds of residents on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, who are dealing with power outages and submerged roads.

A motorist was treated for minor injuries after their car was washed into floodwaters in the Mooloolah Valley, west of the Sunshine Coast, before midnight on Wednesday.

WA: Housing dispute may go to WA Supreme Court

A dispute stemming from the collapse of a property scheme, which has left vulnerable retirees facing potential homelessness, may be headed for the WA Supreme Court.

More than 100 retirees invested their life savings with Sterling First property group before it collapsed in May last year, including 12 properties that were mortgaged to Commco Super.

The matter between the tenants and Commco Super was listed for a trial in Perth Magistrates Court on Wednesday, but lawyers for the tenants said they had applied to have the case heard in the Supreme Court.

The trial was then adjourned pending the hearing of the application in the Supreme Court.

A date is yet to be set for that hearing.

Outside court, Commco Super director Peter Clark told reporters he could not see a settlement happening at this point.

Sport

AFL: Eagle Jack Darling fractures cheekbone

West Coast forward Jack Darling will miss the club's opening pre-season clash because of a fractured cheekbone.

Darling suffered the small fracture during training and will sit out the February 27 match against Essendon in Perth.

The Eagles hope Darling will be fit for the March 7 pre-season encounter against Fremantle.

West Coast's general manager of football Craig Vozzo said Darling was still well on track for the club's season opener against Melbourne on March 22.

"It was friendly fire in training and unfortunately he has a small fracture of the cheekbone," Vozzo told the club's website.

"He will build back into training, just avoiding contact for the next few weeks, but we're still confident in terms of round one."

NRL: Furious Dugan denies faking knee problems

Cronulla fullback Josh Dugan has angrily hit back at suggestions he is faking problems with his knee.

The NSW and Test representative is one of the highest paid at the Sharks and into the final year of his contract with the club, which is reportedly worth \$975,000.

However, issues with his knee have cast doubt over his playing future with reports claiming the Sharks' physios cannot find any issues with the 29-year-old - something he vehemently denies.

It has also been claimed the former Canberra and St George Illawarra star is trying to secure an insurance payout that will allow him to walk away from the NRL.

"All I'm saying is if I've been cleared to train, why am I seeing two different surgeons next week?" Dugan told The Sydney Morning Herald.

CRICK: Labuschagne rapt for South African return

Marnus Labuschagne is excited by the prospect of performing in front of family when he bats in South Africa for the first time representing Australia.

Having been selected in the squad to face the Proteas in three ODIs, starting on February 29, the star Australian batsman will return to the country of his birth.

"All my family's over there (in South Africa). We only have my mum, dad and my sister here (in Australia)," Labuschagne said.

"It's going to be very exciting. Obviously I was born there, I grew up there for the first 10 years of my life.

"But Australia is my home, it's my country and the baggy green is my pride and joy.

"Going back there is going to be really interesting and really exciting because I've got a lot of family there, a lot of support there.