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WHITE — It's been frustrating getting an adequate deployment strategy

Customs cargo system faces more delays

Industry put on hold — again

Julian Bajkowski

HUNDREDS OF IT managers will be required to adjust their calendars after the federal government revealed it will attempt to ram through legislative amendments to delay the introduction of the Australian Customs Service's strife torn Integrated Cargo System (ICS). The system is still too immature to meet its mandated "go live" deadline of July 21 2004, the government conceded.

The delay follows a revolt by trading and transport industry users and software developers after Customs released to industry two tranches of cargo system code deemed so unworkable they were not worthy of alpha test status.

The ICS change will impact numerous IT managers and developers along the supply chain as the delay cascades down through the transport and logistics industries, into wholesalers and through to retail.

A spokesman for Customs and Justice Minister

Senator Chris Ellison told *Computerworld* that, "It is prudent to allow for additional time for the system's introduction. [The government] therefore intends to move an amendment to the Customs Legislation Amendment Bill (No 2) 2003 that would enable an extension to the transition period as a contingency measure."

ICS is a cornerstone of Customs' massive Cargo Management Re-engineering (CMR) project, which is intended to replace a 25-year-old, industry-developed EDI system with a Web-based model. The project is outsourced to a consortium led by Computer Associates which includes EDS and IBM, which aims to automate transactions with Customs for import and export processes including declarations and GST collected at ports.

Further releases of ICS code to industry were halted after a dossier of users' serious complaints to Customs about ICS code was published by *Computerworld* on October 6 (page 1), with outsourcers ordered to stabilise all current ICS R2 (export transactions) code before any further releases.

The amendment to the ICS deadline will delay the ICS R3 (import transactions) system release to industry while current export code is "cleaned up"; the import system for ICS is a vastly more complex exercise.

Trading and transport industry insiders are cheering the delay as a victory for commonsense, arguing any further attempts to force unfinished

code onto users could have brought international trade with Australia to an unceremonious halt.

Managing director of Eagle Data-mation International (EDI) Richard White, whose software firm has been forced to endure a series of half-baked ICS releases from Customs, is one developer not shedding any tears.

"It's been frustrating getting an adequate deployment strategy, and deployment is where this thing [has the potential] to fail. You can deliver technology and get it right on the day, but you have to do an awful lot of background work with training, regression and acceptance testing, getting users to move from their test platforms to production platforms. It's an enormous undertaking. It has to be done in series, it just can't be done in parallel," White told *Computerworld*.

"[The delay] gives Customs, developers and end users the flexibility to take up the system and get it right — rather than being forced into a big-bang release which would almost certainly cause service delivery failures. You can't deliver software for user acceptance tests when you haven't got it working yourself. No one should underestimate the enormous quantum of this change from the imports side. Imports is where everyone is scared witless. CMR, particularly the imports declaration system — once it is implemented smoothly, will be of enormous benefit. It's a very positive development," White said. ▀

A VAST NUMBER of IT managers and developers in transport and logistics industries, wholesales and retail await details on the likely delay.

While the length of extension to be sought by Customs is still unclear, retail industry sources say at least eight months, if not a year, will be needed. Part of the problem is the looming Christmas season's IT system "lock-down" by retail heavyweights Coles Myer and Wool-

worhs, when all system development is suspended to accommodate a seasonal spike in transactions volume when IT capacity utilisation is at its highest.

At least three international airline IT shops are known to have had ICS implementation and developer teams sitting idle for as long as three weeks after the first batch of code went wrong, with no visible solution in sight. ▀

— Julian Bajkowski