

Chapter 1

Introduction

Referral of the inquiry

1.1 On 18 June 2014, the Senate referred the following matter to the Environment and Communications References Committee (the committee) for inquiry and report by the third sitting day in 2015:

The Abbott Government's attacks on Australia's environment, and their effects on our natural heritage and future prosperity, including:

- (a) attacks on carbon pricing, the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, the Australian Renewable Energy Agency and the renewable energy target, the Climate Change Authority and the Climate Commission;
- (b) attacks on federal environmental protection through handing approval powers over to state governments, which have poor track records and recent environment staff cuts;
- (c) attacks on funding for community environment organisations and the Environmental Defenders Offices, abolition of the Biodiversity Fund, and cuts to programs including, Landcare and Caring for our Country;
- (d) undermining Australia's compliance with the World Heritage Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Ramsar Convention, in particular by attacking the Great Barrier Reef and the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Areas; and
- (e) any other related matters.¹

1.2 The reporting date for the inquiry was subsequently extended to the third-last sitting day in June 2015 (23 June 2015).²

Conduct of the inquiry

1.3 The committee advertised the inquiry on its website and wrote to relevant organisations inviting submissions by 10 November 2014.

1.4 The committee received 62 submissions, and held two public hearings. The committee also received 1,233 emails of substantially the same content. A list of submitters to the inquiry is at Appendix 1. A list of the public hearings conducted and witnesses is at Appendix 2.

1 *Journals of the Senate*, 2013–14, no. 32, 18 June 2014, pp 904–05.

2 *Journals of the Senate*, 2013–14, no. 47, 27 August 2014, p. 1313.

1.5 The committee would like to thank all the organisations and individuals that contributed to the inquiry.

Previous work of the committee

1.6 Since the beginning of this Parliament, both the Environment and Communications legislation and references committees have undertaken inquiries into many of the matters referred to in the terms of reference. The committees' reports covered the matters raised in terms of reference (a), (b) and (d), and certain aspects of term of reference (c) as follows:

- term of reference (a):
 - legislation committee report on the Clean Energy Legislation (Carbon Tax Repeal) Bill 2013 [Provisions] and related bill including the Clean Energy Finance Corporation (Abolition) Bill 2013 the Climate Change Authority (Abolition) Bill 2013, tabled in December 2013;
- term of reference (b):
 - legislation committee on report the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Bilateral Agreement Implementation) Bill 2014 [Provisions] and the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Cost Recovery) Bill 2014 [Provisions], tabled in June 2014;
 - references committee report on Environmental Offsets, tabled in June 2014;
- aspects of term of reference (c), including:
 - references committee report on the National Landcare Program, tabled in March 2015; and
- term of reference (d):
 - references committee report on the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, tabled in May 2014;
 - references committee report on the management of the Great Barrier Reef, tabled in September 2014.

1.7 In light of the previous work undertaken by the legislation and references committees, this report will focus on the matters in term of reference (c) that have not been addressed in a prior report, specifically: attacks on funding for community environment organisations and the Environmental Defenders Offices, abolition of the Biodiversity Fund, and cuts to certain programs.

Structure of the report

1.8 This report is comprised of three chapters. Chapter 2 sets out current and former Commonwealth funding arrangements, with particular attention on the impact of the abolition of the Biodiversity Fund. The chapter also sets out general concerns

raised by submitters and witnesses about the cuts to funding of community environmental programs.

1.9 Chapter 3 considers the role and history of the Environmental Defenders Network of environmental lawyers, and highlights the significant role that they have played in providing access to justice on environmental matters.

Hansard

1.10 Please note that where references are given to Hansard transcripts of the public hearings, these refer to the proof Hansard transcripts. Page numbers may vary between proof and final transcripts.

