

ENVIRONMENT, COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Major Senate Report into Salinity Tabled Tuesday 28 March 2006

Inquiry into the extent and economic impact of salinity

The Senate Environment Committee has released the report from their inquiry into the progress of programs aimed at addressing the problems of salinity in the Australian environment.

The inquiry has produced a unanimous report containing 23 recommendations aimed at ensuring further strong progress is made in addressing the economic and environmental consequences of salinity.

The inquiry was chaired by Queensland Democrat Senator, Andrew Bartlett, and also involved full participation from Liberal, Labor and Green Senators in examining the progress and effectiveness of measures that have been tried to date.

"Significant progress has been made in some areas in addressing the impact of salinity, but there is still a lot more than can be done such as coordinating research and communicating the results of scientific work in more useful formats; providing ongoing support and funding certainty to regional NRM bodies and extension workers; better engaging local government in salinity management; and leveraging large-scale private investment in new sustainable industries", Senator Bartlett said.

"The nature of salinity and ways to address it vary significantly from region to region."

"The Committee also believes that much more focus needs to be given to urban salinity. There is clearly still a lack of awareness about this problem and the immense costs in damage to buildings and infrastructure that can occur. Planning decisions are still being made that will result in the next generation having to live with the consequences.

The Committee therefore recommended that mapping be conducted in areas in which salinity is known to be a potential hazard before further urban development is approved in those areas.

"We believe funding through the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, and the Natural Heritage Trust needs to be guaranteed for a much longer term."

"There is also clearly still a problem in some areas with land clearing not being effectively regulated. There is no point spending public money helping to fix up a problem if the behaviour causing the problem is allowed to continue."

MEDIA RELEASE



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"The report is titled *Living with salinity – a progress report* because we need to accept that salinity is part of the Australian environment. The challenge is to do much better in living with it, as well as doing more to repair and ameliorate the damage that has already been caused."

"The fact that this is a unanimous Senate Committee report signals to the government that it is an issue that is beyond party politics and requires cooperation across party lines and levels of government."

"The Committee urges the relevant government Ministers to respond promptly and positively to the recommendations contained in the report."

"Our report does not just reflect the conclusions of Senators, it is based on substantial evidence provided by many people at community level. Ignoring the report is equivalent to ignoring the efforts of the many people who took the time and effort to participate in the inquiry in their desire to contribute to a better future."

Copies of the report are available from the Committee's website or by telephoning the ECITA Committee Secretariat.

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For further comment:

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Among the key recommendations:

- the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality be extended for a further 10 years, with matched funding at least commensurate (on a per year average basis) with the first stage NAP funding, and Natural Heritage Trust be extended for a further 10 years with funding at least commensurate (on a per year average basis) with existing funding levels.
- the Australian Government, through the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council seek greater assurance from the states/territories that land-clearing is being effectively regulated, and that extensions to the NAP funding be conditional on the states/territories meeting more rigorous accountability measures.
- the Australian Government establish an independent body to coordinate salinity research. This body will: maintain a focus on dryland, irrigation and urban salinity; identify and prioritise gaps in research across all research scales; leverage research from existing providers where priority gaps are identified; provide a 'one-stop-shop' for salinity research and information; develop and maintain a website that provides a gateway to all relevant research, policy and practice; and ensure that research is able to be connected up and used at different scales.
- the Australian Government, in cooperation with the states and territories, strengthen the accreditation process for regional bodies, to ensure that funding is conditional on rigorous investment planning, where decisions are based in sound, up-to-date science, outcome-focused and subject to a cost-benefit analysis.
- discrete funding should be allocated in the new (post-2008) NAP funding for regional bodies to partner in regional scale research to deliver R&D outcomes that are more relevant to their regional priorities and needs. It is recommended that all research proposals be assessed by the newly created coordination body to avoid duplication of research efforts.
- the Australian Government establish a working group to identify extension service issues and options for addressing these, with particular attention paid to: the relationship between state, regional and private extension services; the employment conditions, professional development and career pathways of regional extension staff; achieving nationally consistent and relevant training of extension staff; and ensuring that extension services meet the needs of regional groups.
- the Australian Government to review existing policy mechanisms (tax incentives, MBIs etc) in order to provide a policy environment that encourages and supports the development of new, sustainable industries.
- mapping should be conducted in areas in which salinity is known to be a potential hazard before further urban development is approved in those areas.
- the Australian Government give greater emphasis to urban salinity at a national level by: building links between the administering departments and relevant agencies such as the Department of Transport and Regional Services and the Australian Transport Council; and supporting research into the development of technologies for managing urban salinity
- the Australian Government should develop a national policy package to leverage large-scale private sector investment in new, sustainable and profitable solutions.