

Australian Greens – Additional Comments

1.1 The Australian Greens set up this inquiry because the Great Barrier Reef is facing its gravest threat since scientific records began. The science is telling us that the health of the Reef is in decline, and without immediate action we will see drastic changes and the end of the Reef as we know it within our lifetimes.

1.2 The latest threat of rapid industrialisation of the Great Barrier Reef coastline, largely due to massive coal and gas port expansions, could be the last straw. The biggest ever dredging, dumping and shipping program in the Great Barrier Reef's history threatens its integrity directly and also indirectly by facilitating fossil fuel burning to worsen climate change, and will seriously reduce the Reef's resilience.

1.3 The Reef is a wonder of the natural world, and a place of surpassing beauty, but it is also a vital economic asset for Australia. It provides more than 63,000 jobs and contributes \$6 billion each year to the Australian economy. Aside from this direct contribution, the Reef provides many other 'ecosystem services' such as protecting the Queensland coastline from dangerous tropical storms, the value of which has not been calculated.¹

1.4 The Reef has lost 50% of its coral cover in 27 years.² The latest science in the recently released *Outlook Report 2014* compiled by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, states that the outlook for the Reef is poor, and is deteriorating. The pressures the Reef faces are climate change, poor water quality from land-based runoff, impacts from coastal development including ports, and some remaining impacts from fishing.³ All levels of government and all sectors of the community in Australia must act to arrest this decline.

1.5 We welcome the Senate Committee's report and recommendations, but they fall sadly short of the action we so urgently must take if we want the Great Barrier Reef to survive this century.

Ban dumping in the Reef

1.6 Dumping of port dredging spoil offshore in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area seriously threatens the health of marine life and corals including by

1 GBRMPA *Outlook Report 2014*, p 109; AIMS *Submission 34*, p 6.

2 See, for example, Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg and contributing authors (Professor Hoegh-Guldberg), *Submission 6*, p. 3; AIMS, *Submission 36*, p. 1; Professor John Pandolfi, Councillor and Past President, Australian Coral Reef Society, *Committee Hansard*, 21 July 2014, p. 5; Mr Anthony Brown, President, Whitsunday Charter Boat Industry Association, *Committee Hansard*, 22 July 2014, p. 9; Professor Terry Hughes, *Committee Hansard*, 23 July 2014, p. 29; Mr Tony Fontes, *Committee Hansard*, 22 July 2014, p. 1; see also De'ath, Glenn et al, 'The 27-year decline of coral cover on the Great Barrier Reef and its causes', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 109(44), pp 17995–17999, <http://www.pnas.org/content/109/44/17995.full> (accessed 30 July 2014).

3 GBRMPA, *Outlook Report 2014*, p. v.

degrading water quality, mobilising legacy pollutants, including heavy metals found in ports and harbours, and smothering flora and fauna.

1.7 While offshore dumping is meant to be a last resort option under our current domestic laws, it is a frequent occurrence. There is inadequate consideration of alternatives to offshore dumping and no independent cost benefit analysis of alternatives is done by the regulators. They merely accept the claims by proponents that it would be too expensive to dump dredge sludge onshore. The fact that it is cheaper for the ports and big miners to dump sludge into the waters of the Great Barrier Reef, which makes it politically attractive to the big parties, does not make it the right option for the Reef's health. The science is clear, dumping sludge in the Reef's waters is damaging, and this natural wonder of the world should not be a rubbish tip for the financial convenience of the big miners.

1.8 The evidence is now overwhelmingly in favour of an immediate ban on offshore dumping in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. As a step towards that necessary outcome, we welcome the Committee's recommendation for a temporary moratorium on dumping until the work of the expert Dredge Panel is complete, and the recommendation that the Minister should examine whether a cap or a ban on dumping should be introduced. It is clear that such a ban is needed now.

1.9 The evidence received during the inquiry and expressed by internal and former GBRMPA scientists justifies an immediate ban on dumping. Those views have been expressed publicly on ABC's 4 Corners program and internally in documents obtained via freedom of information laws and under a Greens-initiated Senate order for production of documents.

1.10 The Reef should not be a rubbish tip for dumping dredge sludge. No new offshore dumping within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area should be approved. As Professor Pandolfi of the Australian Coral Reef Society stated:

We are over the limit. Once you are over the limit, how can you justify putting more on? We have a problem. We have to reduce it, we can't add to it.⁴

1.11 Under sustained community, scientific, international and political pressure, Environment Minister Greg Hunt has attempted to claim he agrees offshore dumping should not occur. However, the so-called "line in the sand" he says he has drawn under dumping in the Reef is so full of holes as to be meaningless. The Minister excluded dumping from maintenance dredging, and confined his commitment to the Marine Park (not the larger World Heritage Area), and said it would apply to 'future' projects without specifying whether that includes projects which have been applied for but not yet approved. The enormous dredging projects planned for Trinity Inlet at Cairns and the Townsville port expansion have already been applied for, so Minister Hunt must clarify whether the livelihood of those local communities in tourism, fisheries and the associated industries will be safe from dumping. If Minister Hunt's

4 Professor John Pandolfi, Councillor and Past President, Australian Coral Reef Society, *Committee Hansard*, 21 July 2014, p. 2.

commitment excludes any dumping application that has already been applied for (but not yet approved), it is a meaningless commitment. The damaging projects that UNESCO have expressed such concern about are those that have been approved or already applied for. It is hard to countenance that there would be any geographic room (or any economic viability) for additional “future” offshore dumping applications, hence Minister Hunt’s ‘commitment’ is designed to sound good but mean absolutely nothing in practice.

Recommendation 1: Ban offshore dumping - The Australian government must not approve any new offshore dumping in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, including spoil from capital and maintenance dredging, and including not approving any projects which have already been applied for but not yet approved.

Overturn Abbot Point approvals

1.12 In December 2013 Minister Hunt approved the construction of the world’s largest coal port in the middle of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. This expansion of the coal export terminal at Abbot Point would involve the dredging and dumping of 3 million cubic metres of sludge just 8km from coral reefs at Nares Rock and Holborne Island. Much of that dredge spoil would spread far beyond the dump site.

1.13 The UNESCO World Heritage Committee has expressed concern and regret that the Abbot Point approval was taken prior to any comprehensive assessment of alternative and less damaging alternatives.

1.14 Recent scientific findings conclusively show that dredge spoil doubles the risk of coral diseases, including the deadly white syndrome disease.⁵ There is strong evidence that dredge plumes can extend much further than anticipated by GBRMPA during the assessment process for Abbot Point.⁶

1.15 Furthermore, documents released under freedom of information laws and Greens-initiated Senate orders for the production of documents have shown that GBRMPA’s own internal staff and scientists held serious concerns about approving the Abbot Point project throughout 2013. One GBRMPA staff member told the Department of Environment that the proposed 150% water quality offset, which was trumpeted by Minister Hunt, was ‘unachievable’. However, a non-scientifically trained GBRMPA bureaucrat then approved the offshore dumping. The Greens believe that politics trumped science.

1.16 The Abbot Point decision has sparked an unprecedented but entirely justified public outcry. In the week immediately preceding the publication of this report, the

5 Pollock et. al, Sediment and Turbidity Associated with Offshore Dredging Increase Coral Disease Prevalence on Nearby Reefs, *PLoS ONE*: 9(7).

6 See evidence of Mr Jeremy Tager, *Committee Hansard*, 23 July 2014, p 6, Mr Jon Brodie, *Committee Hansard*, 23 July 2014, p 27; and Dr Jamie Oliver, Research Director, AIMS, *Committee Hansard*, 23 July 2014, p 23.

proponent of the project, North Queensland Bulk Ports, has indicated that they will seek an alternative to offshore disposal. We welcome this, but it should not be a voluntary choice by companies, the government should mandate a ban on offshore dumping in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

1.17 In this age of climate change, the world's largest coal port should never have been approved, let alone in the World Heritage Great Barrier Reef. Even if the dredge sludge is dumped onshore, the climate impacts which the port will facilitate, the increased shipping traffic with its increase in likelihood of accidents and other impacts, and the dredging required for this port are all unacceptable. It is shameful that both the Queensland and the Australian governments approved this project, and the approval should be revoked immediately.

Recommendation 2: That Minister Hunt immediately revoke the approvals for the Abbot Point coal port expansion and the associated offshore dumping of dredge sludge.

A strong and independent Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA)

1.18 The Greens believe that a combination of funding cuts by the Abbott government, staff redundancies driven by those cuts and resignations, which may well have been due to decisions like Abbot Point; political pressure to facilitate the fossil fuel export industry; lack of scientific expertise on the board of GBRMPA and the presence of board members with links to the mining industry is compromising the independence and effectiveness of GBRMPA.

1.19 The Greens support the work of GBRMPA and want to see its capacity and its independence strengthened.

Recommendation 3: Funding and staffing of the GBRMPA should be increased in order to ensure that they can provide independent, world-class management of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Recommendation 4: The GBRMPA should review its staffing structure in order to ensure that it is acting in an independent manner.

Recommendation 5: The GBRMP Act should be amended to ensure that GBRMPA is truly independent of the Environment Minister and not vulnerable to political pressure. Anyone with coal and gas interests should be precluded from serving on the board of GBRMPA.

Climate change

1.20 The evidence is clear that climate change is the most significant long term threat to the Reef. Rising ocean temperatures and ocean acidification can literally dissolve the physical structure of the corals which support the incredible diversity of

marine life on the Reef.⁷ Without ambitious, global action on climate change, Australia risks losing the benefits the Reef provides.

1.21 The *Outlook Report*, which was supported by the expert scientific witnesses at hearings, identifies climate change as the ‘most serious threat to the Great Barrier Reef’.⁸ These impacts are already happening, manifesting in coral bleaching, more serious tropical storms, and decreased resilience in the face of other threats, and they will continue to increase in severity.⁹

1.22 The government is living in a climate policy fantasy land. Current climate policy is inconsistent with the government’s stated objective of protecting the Reef. The current inadequate 5% greenhouse gas reduction target by 2020 puts Australia and the world on track for global warming which would see the Reef seriously degraded.¹⁰

1.23 To safeguard the Reef, the current scientific evidence tells us that the world must leave 80% of current known fossil fuel reserves, including coal and gas, in the ground.¹¹ Confronting that challenge will be difficult, but the current government’s policy of ignoring climate change while enthusiastically greasing the wheels of coal exports is irresponsible in the extreme. As Dr McGrath observed at the hearing:

At the moment, we are in a situation like a fellow who is a pack a day smoker, who has been diagnosed with lung cancer—I am not sure how he could afford a packet a day. The doctor says to him: ‘Look, you’ve got to give up your cigarettes.’ He looks the doctor in the eye and says, ‘Doctor, I hear you and I am going to smoke two packets from now on.’ That is pretty well the response we giving to climate change.¹²

1.24 The coal and gas which Australia is exporting will eventually come back to harm the Reef in the form of dangerous climate change.

Recommendation 6: That Australia adopts ambitious targets to reduce greenhouse gas pollution and takes a leadership role in global action to address climate change. This must include an acknowledgement that 80% of known fossil fuel reserves must stay in the ground.

7 See evidence of Mr Jeremy Tager, *Committee Hansard*, 23 July 2014, p 6, Mr Jon Brodie, *Committee Hansard*, 23 July 2014, p 27; and Dr Jamie Oliver, Research Director, AIMS, *Committee Hansard*, 23 July 2014, p 23.

8 GBRMPA, *Outlook Report 2014*, p. v.

9 Professor Terry Hughes, *Committee Hansard*, 23 July 2014, p. 29.

10 Professor Hoegh-Guldberg, *Submission 6*, p. 7.

11 See Dr Chris McGrath, *Submission 32* and Professor Hoegh-Guldberg, *Submission 6*.

12 Dr Chris McGrath, *Committee Hansard*, 21 July 2014, pp 1–2.

Water quality and Reef Rescue funding cuts

1.25 Despite welcome gains in reducing agricultural runoff, the Reef's inshore water quality remains poor, which will only get worse with mass dredging and dumping planned for the Reef's coastline.

1.26 The Abbott and Newman governments are completely undermining the good work of farmers reducing their Reef runoff, by allowing the big mining companies to dump millions of tonnes of sediment directly into the Reef's World Heritage waters.

1.27 What's more, the Abbott Government has cut \$40 million in funding from the federal program to reduce agricultural runoff, Reef Rescue, and put that money into a thought bubble policy, Reef Trust, the details of which have not been worked out.

1.28 Ripping money out of a proven program for an ill-defined experiment is bad news for the Reef.

1.29 Degraded water quality from land-based run-off, especially in inshore areas is a serious short- and long-term threat to the Reef identified repeatedly in expert and community submissions. GBRMPA's *Outlook Report 2014* and the Australian Institute of Marine Science both observe that water quality is directly affecting the Reef, but also severely limiting its ability to recover from other pressures. In the words of Professor Hoegh-Guldberg, the Reef is a 'prize fighter' who is getting too sick to bounce back from injury.¹³

1.30 The Greens support the Reef Water Quality Program (previously called Reef Rescue), but more must be done. The stated goal of the program is that, by 2020, the quality of water entering the Great Barrier Reef from catchment areas has no detrimental impact on the health and resilience of the Reef, but it is not clear that the government understands what will be required to achieve that goal. That is why the Greens support the Committee's recommendation that explicit load reduction targets be established.

1.31 Many submissions to this inquiry as well as local residents, tourism operators and fishers raised the issue of water quality, and pointed to the hypocrisy of allowing ports and the mining industry to dump its waste products in the Reef's waters while closely regulating other industries such as tourism, and while spending public money on schemes to reduce agricultural run-off.¹⁴

Recommendation 7: The Australian Government should immediately reverse cuts to the funding for the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan.

Gladstone Harbour dredging and dumping

1.32 In relation to the Gladstone Western Basin Dredging and Dumping project, the Committee heard deeply disturbing evidence about serious and ongoing environmental harm occurring in the context of inadequate regulation and deeply

13 Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, *Committee Hansard*, 21 July 2014, p. 10.

14 CAFNEC, *Submission 19*, p. 5; Mr Tony Brown, President, Whitsunday Charter Boat Industry Association, *Committee Hansard* 23 July 2014, p 13; Carefish, *Submission 16*, p 3.

inappropriate conflicts of interest.¹⁵ Extensive criticisms were also levelled against the consultant ecologists contracted to monitor the dredging project. Outside of this inquiry, each of the Queensland Auditor-General's report, the federal ANAO report and the bund wall inquiry initiated by Minister Hunt all discussed below reveal serious failings in our environmental regulatory system. It is clear that the environmental regulators at a State and Federal level are failing and have lost the trust of the community.

1.33 As reiterated throughout the hearings, the dredging and dumping at Gladstone Harbour caused an environmental disaster, with mass dolphin, dugong and turtle deaths and outbreaks of fish mutilations. Under pressure, Minister Hunt established the Gladstone Bund Wall Review, which found a staggering failure of regulation, from poorly drafted conditions of approval, to inadequate monitoring and enforcement.

1.34 The Australian National Audit Office report *Managing Compliance with EPBC conditions of approval* has recently found that the Environment Department does not have enough staff to enforce conditions, adding to the Bund Wall Review's finding that inadequate staffing contributed to the failures in Gladstone. The Federal government's recent Budget has cut a further 129 staff from the division responsible for enforcement.

1.35 The Greens would like to thank the many local residents and other stakeholders who made submissions and gave evidence, often recounting painful personal circumstances, regarding Gladstone Western Basin project. We understand that the Bund Wall Review's narrow terms of reference precluded any considerations of the wider impacts of the Gladstone Harbour dredging. In establishing this inquiry we sought to give a proper airing to the many outstanding issues. Unfortunately many submissions were accepted as confidential and evidence taken in-camera. The issues surrounding the Gladstone Western Basin project warrant a further comprehensive – and public – investigation.

1.36 Even though the Gladstone Harbour environmental disaster, which crippled local fishing and tourism businesses, has not yet been comprehensively independently investigated, approvals for dredging and dumping in the Great Barrier Reef have continued unabated.

Recommendation 8: That the events surrounding environmental harm caused by the Gladstone Western Basin dredging project be comprehensively independently investigated.

15 See testimony of, Dr Matthew Landos, Director, Frenchs Forest Veterinary Surgery; Honorary Lecturer and Associate Researcher, Sydney University Faculty of Veterinary Science, *Committee Hansard* 22 July 2014; Mr Michael McCabe, Coordinator, Capricorn Conservation Council, *Committee Hansard*, 22 July 2014, p. 32; Department of the Environment, *Gladstone Bund Wall Review*, May 2014, <http://www.environment.gov.au/topics/marine/gbr/gladstone-bund-wall-review>.

Recommendation 9: That the Australian Government immediately strengthen its capacity and willingness to undertake independent monitoring of environmental approval conditions it imposes.

Reef Trust and environmental offsets

1.37 The Greens do not support the use of environmental offsets. They are based on a fiction that the environment is replaceable, and they are used to allow otherwise unacceptable projects to proceed. A previous Senate Committee references inquiry established by the Greens documented a litany of failures on the part of environmental offsets. The Greens acknowledge that offsets cannot and will not ever work as intended.

1.38 In the interests of delivering a majority report we accept the Committee's recommendations 28 and 29 regarding offsets but note that it remains the Greens view that World Heritage cannot be offset because all of it is precious and irreplaceable. We also note the clear evidence taken in the inquiry that offsets in the marine environment are even more difficult to both calculate and deliver.

1.39 The Greens support any program aimed at improving the health and resilience of the Reef, but Reef Trust represents a serious risk of producing a conflict of interest. At present, Reef Trust appears to be a re-badging of old Reef Rescue funding to create the impression of progress. The government has announced that it will source some Reef Trust funding from financial offsets. Tying critical conservation funding to payments under financial offsets creates a conflict of interest for GBRMPA. GBRMPA would rely on projects being approved with generous financial offsets in order to continue its much needed work. As the decision maker in those applications, GBRMPA would be faced with a dangerous conflict of interest.

Recommendation 10: That projects within or impacting on the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area which are unacceptable without offsets be rejected outright.

Recommendation 11: That funding for future activities under the Reef Trust not be sourced from existing Reef Rescue funds or from financial offsets from proponents.

Conclusion

1.40 The inquiry into this bill has given the community and our best reef scientists a critical opportunity to put to our nation's leaders, and on the public record, their serious concerns about the huge threats to the Great Barrier Reef posed particularly by industrialisation of the Reef coast, and the steps we urgently need to take to protect the Reef.

1.41 We would like to thank the Acting Committee Chair, committee members and the secretariat for facilitating the inquiry process that allowed evidence from the community, experts and industry to be presented and carefully examined by the Committee.

1.42 There are innumerable experts, environment groups and community members working hard across Australia to secure better understanding and political action to

save our Reef. We warmly acknowledge their tireless work and invaluable contributions to this inquiry.

1.43 The Greens take the concerns of the Queensland community, our fishers, tourism operators and reef scientists and the UN World Heritage Committee seriously. That is why in the last Parliament we introduced a bill in March 2103 to implement the World Heritage Committee's recommendations to keep the Great Barrier Reef off the *World Heritage In Danger list*, namely to rule out new ports, to stop port expansions that would damage the overall universal value of the Reef, for a moratorium on new approvals until a long term plan for the Reef had been completed, and for any approval after that to have a net benefit for the Reef.

1.44 We reintroduced that bill in the current Parliament in February 2014 and included a ban on new offshore dumping. That bill, and these additional comments, proposes to ban offshore dumping of port dredging sludge within the Great Barrier Reef's waters, and are backdated to ensure that the plan to dump dredge spoil offshore at Abbot Point is stopped.

1.45 The Greens believe our environment laws are failing to protect the Reef. The Reef is too precious to lose, and the Greens will fight for its future.

Senator Larissa Waters
Greens Senator for Queensland

