

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee
Answers to questions on notice
Environment portfolio

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Programme: Office of Water Science

Topic: Update on the Bioregional Planning Process

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Senator Waters asked:

Senator WATERS: Thank you for staying back late tonight, and hello to the minister. I have a few questions, and I will start off with the independent expert scientific committee. I will not try to pronounce your name—last time I think I tripped up. It is a bit of a mouthful there; a double-barrel. Could you please update me on the bioregional planning process that is being undertaken under the national partnerships agreement?

Ms Nethercott-Watson: As we talked about last time, the bioregional assessment methodology has a number of components, and that bioregional assessment methodology, which has been developed by scientific agencies, has now been publicly released. The input data that needed to come from the catchment management authorities—that is, local data identifying water-related assets that would be used as the basis of the assessment for the bioregional assessments—have been received from 29 natural resource management organisations. Some of those need final clarification, and we are doing some reconciliation on that to make sure that things like Ramsar wetlands and a number of Commonwealth assets are identified as well. There are 10 more that are still to come from there.

We have done a lot of work on data licensing arrangements. You can understand, given that this particular scientific program has a heavy reliance on gathering data, that we need to ensure what the data licensing arrangements are. We have finalised our negotiations with the New South Wales state agencies as to how that would occur, and we are well advanced with negotiations with the Queensland government. In terms of the technical products, you will probably remember from what I said last time that there are approximately 20 technical products that are possible through each of the five components for bioregional assessments. The actual delineation on what those products can say, and whether they are possible and equivalent across subregions, will depend on the data available. We are starting to progress on some of those products.

are approximately four technical products that can be delivered. The first of those is called a context statement. For each subregion, things like the geography, geology and hydrogeology et cetera are being documented based on known information into one document. The context statement for the Namoi subregion is almost finalised—it is currently in quality assurance. The Gloucester region and Clarence-Moreton region have been substantially progressed.

The scientific teams have also done a number of workshops and are progressing their thinking in terms of how to start the impact analysis and conceptual modelling components. There was a recent workshop, for example, for the Gloucester region. In the next few weeks we are going up to the Gloucester region to talk with stakeholders about the start of that process. The kick-off, in terms of where we would go from here, moves from the water-related asset register—

which comes from those NRM data—to what the receptors are. The distinction between assets and receptors is that an asset is a water-related asset in a particular subregion that can be anthropogenic or ecological, and a receptor is an attribute of that water-related asset that is affected by a change in water. For example, an asset could be a wetland—

Senator WATERS: Or a water-dependent species.

Ms Nethercott-Watson: That is right, but you can also have other things that would need to be looked as part of what an asset and receptor are.

Senator WATERS: Could I just butt in. I have my eye on the clock and my limited time. That was wonderful context—thank you. Could you give me that particular tranche of your answer on notice if there is more to go, because I do appreciate that context.

Answer:

Other activities which have occurred through the Bioregional Assessment Programme include:

- Development of Context Statements (technical products which summarise current knowledge of geography, geology, hydrogeology, hydrology and ecology) for priority subregions, such as Namoi.
- Establishment of a Technical Assurance Reference Group, chaired by the Office of Water Science's Principal Science Advisor and which will have representation from the New South Wales, Queensland, South Australian and Victorian State Governments.
- Funding for the South Australian and Queensland Governments to undertake projects in the Lake Eyre Basin, which are developing inputs to bioregional assessments, including collating and review of existing data on groundwater, surface water and water dependent ecosystems.
- Identification of Preliminary Assessment Extents - areas where water related impacts may potentially occur - for the Galilee, Gloucester and Namoi subregions.
- Development of a prototype for a federated, discovery and access information platform across multiple Australian Government data provider organisations. Consideration of the scope and timeframes for the development of the final system is also underway. It is intended that the final system should provide all stakeholders with consistent and transparent access to information generated from bioregional assessments (subject to licensing conditions).
- Stakeholder engagement activities with peak bodies at the national and state levels, as well as at the local level. Face to face meetings at the local level to-date have focused on priority subregions - Gloucester, Galilee, Namoi and Clarence-Moreton.