



Australian Government

Australian Government Response Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry Report: Australia's Environment

April 2017

Introduction

On 18 June 2014, the Senate referred the following matter to the Environment and Communications References 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.*

The Australian Government has considered the recommendations of the committee's report and has provided the responses below.

Commonwealth funding for environmental programs

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that the Department of the Environment undertake an evaluation of the impact of the Biodiversity Fund.

Response:

Noted.

The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that programs achieve environmental outcomes from its natural resource management investments. The Department of the Environment and Energy has established an on-line monitoring, reporting, evaluation and improvement tool so that funding recipients can track and report on project progress and achievements, and so that the Australian Government can track and report on the impact of programs for the environment and the community. The Department of the Environment and Energy will continue to use this tool to evaluate the outcomes of programs it administers, including the Biodiversity Fund.

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government reinstate funding for projects for biodiversity conservation to the level which had been available under the Biodiversity Fund.

Response:

Not Agreed.

The Biodiversity Fund was a measure under the Clean Energy Future plan. Following the repeal of the Carbon Tax, this and other associated measures were terminated. Existing commitments under the Biodiversity Fund have continued. The uncommitted funding from the Biodiversity Fund was redirected to fund other priority programs.

The Australian Government is committed to undertaking practical action to deliver lasting benefits to the environment. The Government is currently investing \$1.9 billion over four years from 2014-15 to manage our natural resources (including biodiversity conservation).

The Government recently announced a \$30 million plan to support local parks and environment. This includes \$22.8 million for a new Improving Your Local Parks and Environment Program that will deliver grants to local councils, community groups, environment groups and others to support revitalisation, maintenance, management and improvement works at local parks, nature reserves, rivers, coastal areas and community facilities.

The 20 Million Trees Program is achieving important outcomes for the environment and communities by increasing and improving habitat for our threatened species and creating green spaces to improve the liveability of our cities and towns.

The Government is continuing to provide funding for and work closely with Australia's 56 regional Natural Resource Management organisations to deliver targeted on-ground actions across the country to deliver the best results. The Government is providing for biodiversity conservation through other initiatives such as the Reef 2050 Plan and work being undertaken by rural research and development corporations.

Environmental Defenders Offices

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government establish new funding agreements for the Environmental Defenders Offices which reinstate the recurrent funding previously provided.

Response:

Not Agreed.

The Government has determined that legal assistance funding should be directed to front-line services where the need is greatest such as services providing help to those affected by domestic and family violence, and for people who experience multiple forms of disadvantage. Funding for the Environmental Defenders Offices will not be reinstated.

Government Senators' dissenting report

Recommendation 1

That the committee commends the Government for undertaking massive investment in environmental programs in an unprecedented environment of fiscal constraint.

Response:

Agreed.

The Government is committed to delivering on important environmental outcomes. This is demonstrated by our investment in a range of programs and initiatives, such as:

- A new \$30 million plan to support local parks and the environment including:
 - \$22.8 million for the new Improving Your Local Parks and Environment Program that will provide grants to councils, community and environmental groups that revitalise and improve local parks, nature reserves, coastal areas and community facilities.
 - \$6.2 million for Solar Programs that will support community groups and food rescue charities to install rooftop solar photovoltaic, solar hot water and battery systems to reduce costs and reduce emissions.
 - \$1 million to support upgrades to cleaner outboard engines used by surf lifesaving clubs taking practical action to tackle climate change, while also providing efficiency benefits to these important local groups.
- Funding of \$210 million over eight years from 2014-15 for the Reef Trust to support projects that improve water quality and coastal habitat along the Great Barrier Reef.
- A new Reef Fund that will provide funding of \$1 billion over ten years from 2016-17 for clean energy projects that will reduce emissions and improve water quality in the Great Barrier Reef.
- Funding of \$1 billion over four years from 2014-15 for the National Landcare Program to support the protection, conservation and rehabilitation of Australia's natural environment and to help drive sustainable agriculture to deliver long-term benefits to our communities, our environment, our economy and our country. In the 2016-17 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook, the Government agreed to direct a further \$100 million to the National Landcare Program from 2016-17 to support the protection of Australia's plants, animals, ecosystems and waterways.
- A commitment of \$2.55 billion to establish the Emissions Reduction Fund. The Emissions Reduction Fund is creating positive incentives for businesses to adopt better practices and technologies to cut the amount of greenhouse gases they create, without adding to household and business energy costs.
- Funding of \$145 million over six years under the National Environmental Science Program. This will deliver environmental research to ensure decisions about managing Australia's biodiversity and environmental resources are made based on the best available information.

- Appointment of a Threatened Species Commissioner, bringing a new national focus to conservation efforts and helping to address the growing number of native flora and fauna in Australia facing extinction. The Threatened Species Commissioner is overseeing the implementation of the Threatened Species Strategy. The Strategy is a plan for how work will be prioritised over the next five years, in partnership with the community and state and territory governments.
- Establishment of a \$5 million Threatened Species Recovery Fund to support local communities in the fight to protect Australia's vulnerable wildlife.

Australian Greens additional comments

Recommendation 1

The Abbott Government should abandon its ideological attack on deductible gift recipient status of the voices of the environment.

Response:

Noted.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment tabled its report into the administration, transparency and effectiveness of the Register of Environmental Organisations on 4 May 2016. The Government is considering its response to the report's recommendations.

Recommendation 2

The Abbott Government should restore funding to the Environmental Defenders Offices to at least the level which existed in September 2013 (including both recurrent and supplementary funding) and should consider increasing that funding based on the Productivity Commission's recommendations for \$200 million increase in funding for community legal centres.

Response:

Not agreed.

The Government has determined that legal assistance funding should be directed to front-line services where the need is greatest—such as services providing help to those affected by domestic and family violence, and for people who experience multiple forms of disadvantage. Funding for the Environmental Defenders Offices will not be reinstated.

The Productivity Commission's recommendation for increased funding in the order of \$200 million each year related to legal assistance generally, and envisaged that 40 per cent of this, or \$80 million each year, should come from the states and territories.

Recommendation 3

The Abbott Government should remove the gag clauses in funding agreements with non-government organisations which prevent them from advocating for better protections for the environment and which prevent them from standing with the community against extractive industries such as coal and unconventional gas to protect our land, water and a safe climate.

Response:

Noted.

There are no 'gag clauses' in funding agreements between the Commonwealth and service providers. The Government has determined that Commonwealth funding should not be used for lobbying activities. All funding arrangements for legal assistance service providers will continue to reflect this principle.

Recommendation 4

The Abbott Government should restore core funding for the voices of our environment under the Grants to Voluntary Environment, Sustainability and Heritage Organisations (GVESHO) program.

Response:

Not Agreed.

The Grants for Voluntary, Environmental, Sustainability and Heritage Organisation Program was a competitive grants program that ceased on 30 June 2014. To return the Budget to a sustainable footing, the Government has made difficult decisions to identify savings and efficiencies over the longer term.

The Government recognises the valuable contribution made by environment and heritage groups in raising community awareness and encouraging the community to get involved in environmental and heritage projects. The Government is committed to supporting these groups and the community to engage in local activities.

Through the Community Heritage and Icons Program, the Government is continuing to support heritage groups working to protect important local heritage sites. There are opportunities through the new Improving Your Local Parks and Environment Program and the National Landcare Program, including the 20 Million Trees initiative, for environment and heritage groups to be involved in, and work with others on, projects that deliver benefits to the environment.

Recommendation 5

The Biodiversity Fund should be fully restored, up to a total level of \$946 million, inclusive of projects already funded under previous funding rounds.

Response:

Not agreed.

As per the response to Recommendation 2, the Biodiversity Fund was a measure under the Clean Energy Future plan. Following the repeal of the Carbon Tax, this and other associated measures were terminated. Uncommitted funding from the Biodiversity Fund has been redirected to fund other priority programs.

Existing commitments under the Biodiversity Fund have continued and are included in investment under the Land Sector Package.

The Australian Government is committed to undertaking practical action to deliver lasting benefits to the environment and is investing \$1.9 billion over four years from 2014-15 in managing our natural resources. This includes funding for the National Landcare Program, such as \$70 million for the 20 Million Trees Program from and \$450 million of funding for the 56 natural resource management organisations. It also includes funding for complementary initiatives such as the Reef 2050 Plan and work being undertaken by rural research and development corporations.

Recommendation 6

Funding for the National Landcare Program should be restored to September 2013 levels.

Response:

Not agreed.

The Australian Government is investing \$1.9 billion over four years from 2014-15 in managing our natural resources, enabling communities to take practical action to improve their local environment. This investment includes funding for the National Landcare Program.

In the 2016-17 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook, the Government agreed to direct a further \$100 million to the National Landcare Program from 2016-17 to support the protection of Australia's plants, animals, ecosystems and waterways.

The National Landcare Program is investing \$1 billion over four years from 2014-15 to deliver long-term benefits to the community, environment, economy and country. This includes over \$450 million for Australia's 56 regional natural resource management organisations to support local action by local communities. Of this funding more than \$120 million is being spent nationally on on-ground community natural resource management activities.

The National Landcare Program supports a number of important initiatives such as the 20 Million Trees Program, as well as continuing commitments such as World Heritage and Indigenous Protected Areas. Through the 20 Million Trees Program farmers, Landcare and other community groups have access to funding so that they can continue to undertake important on-ground works in local communities.

Recommendation 7

Funding for welcome commitments on the Great Barrier Reef should not come at the expense of other environment programs.

Response:

Noted.

The Australian Government is committed to the ongoing protection and management of the Great Barrier Reef. The Reef is iconic and is important for its unique and biologically diverse ecosystems and attracts more than 1.6 million visitors each year. It is the largest coral reef ecosystem on earth and the Government is taking significant steps to ensure that it remains a natural wonder for successive generations.

The Government's investment is targeted towards the management or mitigation of those threats that pose a high risk to resilience and health of the Reef.

The Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan, released in 2015, provides a shared pathway to the future by bringing together actions across government, industry, Traditional Owners, researchers and the community for the first time. The Plan aims to ensure the Outstanding Universal Value of the Great Barrier Reef continues to improve each decade between now and 2050.

The Australian and Queensland governments will invest more than \$2 billion over the coming decade in the health of the Reef. This includes \$460 million in program funding through the Department of the Environment and Energy allocated since 2014-15, including:

- \$210 million allocated over eight years to the Reef Trust, which was established by the government in 2014.
- \$116.6 million (from 2014-15 to 2017-18) delivered through the Reef Program and associated initiatives, including under the National Landcare Program, the contribution to the Great Barrier Reef Foundation and the Biodiversity Fund.
- \$101 million (from 2016-17 to 2021-22) announced in the latest budget to support implementation of the Reef 2050 Plan through the National Landcare Program.
- \$32 million through the National Environmental Science Program's Tropical Water Quality Hub.

To respond to the two biggest threats facing the Great Barrier Reef, climate change and water quality, the Government has established a new Reef Fund. The Reef Fund will provide up to \$1 billion over 10 years to finance clean energy projects that reduce emissions and improve water quality in the Great Barrier Reef.

In addition to funding for projects, the Government has legislated a ban on the disposal of capital dredge material in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. The ban applies to all past and present permits and future applications for capital dredge disposal. The Queensland Government mirrored this ban in the remainder of the World Heritage Area, including port areas.

