



Opening statement from Paul Gamblin, CEO of the Australian Marine Conservation Society

Thank you Chair for the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee. The Australian Marine Conservation Society has a long history advocating for reform of the EPBC Act, widely acknowledged as not delivering for nature, ocean and coasts. A strong, enforceable national environment law, overseen by the Commonwealth Government, is critical in ensuring our natural environment and the biodiversity of Australia's ocean and coasts are protected, particularly when facing the increasing challenges of a warming climate and the resulting intensity of disasters including underwater heatwaves, fires, droughts and floods. The current Bills include a number of positive new features, including a definition of unacceptable impacts, National Environmental Standards (Standards), a National Environment Protection Agency and a broader suite of compliance and enforcement tools.

However, many of these positive aspects are compromised by the high levels of ministerial discretion littered throughout the bills. There is also a risk that any improvements made through the positive features will be undermined by other aspects of the reform package such as weaker offsetting rules, fast-tracked development pathways, relaxed devolution and national interest exemptions which significantly increase decision-maker discretion, including for example, allowing the Minister to make decisions that are inconsistent with a Recovery Plan. The reforms still fail to address climate change, or remove exemptions that allow deforestation in the Great Barrier Reef catchments and allow threatened and protected species such as turtles, whales and dolphins to be killed in shark net programs.

With political will, all of these problems are fixable, however AMCS considers that the current package of Bills should not be supported without amendments that will ensure meaningful outcomes for Australia's deteriorating natural heritage. We have provided the Committee with a list of the missing elements and regressive reforms requiring amendment. The current Bills must be strengthened to deliver the transformational change required to ensure these reforms deliver outcomes for nature and future generations.