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Submission to the Senate Economics References Committee

Inquiry into Funding and Resourcing of the CSIRO

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Economics References Committee inquiry into the funding and resourcing of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

CSIRO plays a unique and irreplaceable role in Australia's national research ecosystem. It provides long-term, mission-driven scientific capability in areas of national importance that cannot be sustained by universities or industry alone. This submission focuses particularly on:

- the recruitment, retention, and career pathways of scientific staff (Term of Reference (d)); and
- the impacts of recent and proposed cuts on environmental science, with particular emphasis on the Environment Research Unit (Terms of Reference (h) and (h)(iii)).

Sovereign scientific capability

Australia's national interest is in the protection and sustainable management of its unique and world-class flora and fauna, clean air and water, and healthy ecosystems – all of which are sources of great national pride. This interest underpins economic and community resilience in sectors such as agriculture, forestry, and tourism, all of which are highly exposed to climate-driven risks including droughts, heatwaves, floods, and ecosystem degradation. To achieve this, Australia requires sovereign scientific capability in climate and Earth system science, including ecosystem processes (such as carbon and water cycling), agriculture and forestry systems, and integrated long-term environmental monitoring and modelling to support practical, evidence-based decision-making.

These capabilities rely on sustained investment in people, infrastructure, and long-running research programs. Once lost, they are extremely difficult to rebuild. CSIRO is uniquely positioned to maintain this capability. Universities are constrained by short-term funding cycles and teaching obligations, while industry has neither the incentive nor mandate to invest in foundational public-good science. As a result, many nationally critical capabilities exist only within CSIRO.

Workforce impacts and retention (Term of Reference (d))

Scientific capability is not simply a matter of staffing numbers; it reflects the **accumulated expertise, institutional knowledge, and technical skill developed over decades**. Recent and proposed job cuts risk the permanent loss of mid-career and senior researchers who are essential for mentoring, systems-level research, and translating science into policy-relevant outcomes.

Critically, uncertainty around funding and career pathways also undermines the training and retention of early-career researchers, increasing the likelihood that highly skilled scientists will leave Australia or public research altogether. In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, this represents a significant long-term risk. Sustained public investment in CSIRO staffing is therefore essential to maintaining Australia's scientific and economic resilience.

Environmental science and the Environment Research Unit (Terms of Reference (h) and (h)(iii))

Environmental science is an area where public funding is especially critical. Many of Australia's most pressing challenges—climate change impacts, biodiversity loss, water security, land degradation, and agricultural adaptation—do not attract sustained industry investment, yet carry substantial national consequences.

CSIRO's environmental research has underpinned government priorities through essential contributions to climate adaptation and mitigation, ecosystem monitoring, management of pests and diseases, and sustainable agriculture and forestry. The Environment Research Unit, in particular, provides foundational knowledge and tools directly aligned with publicly stated national priorities. Disproportionate cuts to this capability risk weakening Australia's preparedness for environmental shocks and undermining evidence-based decision-making.

Concluding remarks

CSIRO delivers public-good science that is fundamental to Australia's national interest. Cuts to funding and staffing—particularly within environmental research—risk permanently eroding sovereign scientific capability that cannot be replaced by universities, industry, or international partners.

Long-term, stable public investment in CSIRO's workforce and environmental research is essential to ensure Australia remains capable of addressing current and future challenges in a rapidly changing climate and increasingly degraded environment.

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