

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
TO THE REPORT OF THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AND EXTERNAL TERRITORIES**

Antarctica: Australia's Pristine Frontier
A report on the adequacy of funding for Australia's Antarctic
Program by the Joint Standing Committee on the National
Capital and External Territories

**THE HON MALCOLM TURNBULL MP
MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT
AND WATER RESOURCES**

Foreword

The Howard Government remains strongly committed to Australia's Antarctic programme. It recognises the significance to Australia of the Antarctic Treaty system and the importance of our contribution to it. The Government values Australia's leadership in Antarctic science and in Antarctic environmental protection initiatives.

Consistent with this commitment, the Government welcomed the inquiry by the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories into the adequacy of funding for the Australian Antarctic Division of the Department of the Environment and Water Resources.

The Government notes that the Joint Standing Committee reviewed the Department's annual reports, obtained briefings from the Australian Antarctic Division and conducted public hearings between March and June 2004.

The Government thanks the Joint Standing Committee for its report *Antarctica: Australia's Pristine Frontier: Report on the adequacy of funding for Australia's Antarctic Program*. The Government appreciates the considerable efforts of the Committee members and all others who assisted in development of the report's recommendations.

The Government recognises the heavy resources demands placed on the Australian Antarctic Division's logistical, research and environmental activities because of the remoteness of those activities and the difficult climate. In addition, there are increasing costs associated with compliance with environmental standards and with occupational health and safety management in an inherently hostile and sensitive environment.

The Government remains committed to an effective and collaborative Antarctic Science programme, and encourages thorough examination of opportunities for international cooperation in Antarctic research and logistic support. Consistent with this commitment, in May 2005 the Government made a four-year \$46.3 million funding boost to make possible an inter-continental Airlink between Hobart and Casey Station. This is the largest single increase in spending for the Antarctic programme for over two decades.

Direct access to Antarctica by a fast and safe Airlink is no longer a dream. This initiative will significantly modernise the Australian Antarctic Division's capacity to support activities in Antarctica. In addition, it will give Australia an Antarctic presence consistent with our national interest and with the Government's long term commitment to our continuing leadership in the region.

The Government is confident that the provision of these additional resources will enable the Australian Antarctic Division to:

- ensure that Australia continues to play an active and leading role in Antarctic science research;
- build on its collaborative partnerships with other Antarctic nations, and to significantly enhance the public profile of Australia's Antarctic science programme; and
- fulfil its legislative environmental and cultural heritage obligations.

The Government's response to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories (JSCNCET) Report Recommendations

Operations and logistical support

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government makes funding available in the 2005-06 financial year to enable a scoping study to be conducted to determine the need for a new dedicated marine research vessel to advance marine science in general and, the Australian Government's goals for Australia's Antarctic programme.

Support in principle

The Government accepts the importance of undertaking marine research in the Southern Ocean in support of the Australian Government's goals for Antarctica. It also understands the less-than-ideal situation inherent in the multi-purpose nature of Australia's existing Antarctic research voyages.

The Australian Antarctic Division of the Department of the Environment and Water Resources will be commencing a new tender process for the provision of shipping services for the 2007/08 financial year. As part of the budget process tied to this tender the Australian Antarctic Division will review its operational requirements in light of the impending introduction of the intercontinental airlink between Hobart and Casey Station and the impact that this will have on the type of shipping service required to meet the needs of the Australian Antarctic programme. The Government recognises the importance of maintaining a viable and world class capability to undertake marine science in the Southern Ocean and this will be addressed as part of this process.

The Australian Antarctic Division is currently fully committed to the implementation of the Antarctic Airlink. This project will provide a flexible transportation system and dramatically change the way that Australia supports its Antarctic programme. The introduction of intercontinental air transport will also allow for a change in the way that shipping is used.

The Government agrees with the Joint Standing Committee that the Australian Antarctic Division must continue to seek partnerships which will enhance the marine research component of the science programme and that the Australian Antarctic Division should continue to utilise its current shipping arrangements to cater for logistical and marine science needs.

Australia's obligations under the Antarctic Treaty System

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government makes an appreciable investment commensurate with Australia's significant involvement in polar activities to support Australian programs planned for the International Polar Year 2007-2008 and ensures that Australia plays a leading role in International Polar Year activities. In addition, the Committee notes the need for additional funds to be made available immediately for this purpose.

Support in principle

As leader of the Australian Antarctic programme, the Australian Antarctic Division of the Department of the Environment and Water Resources is already making a significant contribution to International Polar Year activities within its current science programme.

The Government agrees that the International Polar Year 2007-08 represents a significant opportunity to build on Australia's extensive collaborative partnerships with other Antarctic nations, to enhance the public profile of Australia's Antarctic science programme and to realise the benefits of access to both shared logistics and to major new collaborative data sources.

Australian scientists are closely involved in the development and implementation of the International Polar Year, and in coordinating key projects. This includes taking lead roles in the Census of Antarctic Marine Life, an oceanographic study investigating the climate of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean, and a geophysical and glaciological survey of the extensive Gamburtsev sub-glacial mountains in the Australian Antarctic Territory.

The Australian Antarctic Division is active in sourcing funding support for International Polar Year projects from external agencies. As an example, in mid-2005 the United States based Sloan Foundation agreed to provide funding support for the Census of Antarctic Marine Life.

The Australian Antarctic Division has received many research project proposals as part of the Australian Antarctic Science Grants scheme for International Polar Year related activities. These will all be assessed for funding suitability and support as part of the 2006/07 appraisal process.

The Government's commitment to fund the Australian Antarctic Airlink will also provide Australian scientists with better access to Antarctica during the International Polar Year. The Australian Antarctic Division is also considering ways to reschedule logistic support for Antarctic science so that activities are maximised during the International Polar Year period.

Conservation and protection of the Antarctic environment

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government allocate an additional \$50 million to the budget of the Department of the Environment and Water Resources over a ten-year period, to be administered under Australia's Antarctic Program, specifically for the remediation of past work sites in the Australian Antarctic Territory.

Support in principle

The Government is firmly committed to meeting Australia's obligations under the Madrid Protocol. The Government also clearly understands that site remediation in Antarctica is difficult due to the harsh climatic conditions and remoteness. These factors make clean-up activities extremely costly and difficult to complete in the short term.

The total cost for the remediation of past activities in Antarctica has not yet been fully determined and any budget implications can only be considered when all requirements are known. In the meantime, scientific research will continue to be undertaken as part of Australia's Antarctic science program to develop strategies and techniques to safely clean-up the sites of past activities without damaging the fragile environment of Antarctica. This will also assist in providing an indication of the success of past remediation efforts.

Cultural heritage management: Mawson's Huts

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that additional funding be provided to enable the Australian Antarctic Division to comply with its responsibilities under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999) for its work with the cultural heritage management of Mawson's Huts. The Committee also encourages the continuation of partnership links with community sponsors to continue the restoration work of Mawson's Huts.

Support in principle

The Government recognises the heritage significance of Mawson's Huts, Australia's most important cultural heritage site in Antarctica, and the importance of conserving the site. The Government applauds the efforts already undertaken by various community groups supported by the Australian Antarctic Division of the Department of the Environment and Water Resources to protect this valuable part of Australia's heritage.

The Australian Antarctic Division, in collaboration with a number of community groups, has been actively involved in the conservation of the Mawson's Huts site since 1997, and continues to provide support to bodies interested in conserving the site. This includes providing logistic support, expert advice and in-kind support (such as the loan of equipment) and facilitating access to the site so that conservation work can be undertaken. The Australian Antarctic Division continues to investigate ways to enable future joint public/private initiatives to play active roles in preserving historic Antarctic sites. The Australian Antarctic Division is also working with other divisions within the Department of the Environment and Water Resources on the development of a comprehensive Antarctic and subantarctic heritage plan.

The Australian Antarctic Division will continue to support conservation of Antarctic heritage sites, taking into account the urgency of action, professional assessment of conservation actions and the relative priority accorded to other environmental and research commitments. The Australian Antarctic Division will also pursue options of public and private partnerships to assist in this work.

Australia's Antarctic science program

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the current appropriation for the Australian Antarctic Science grants scheme administered by the Australian Antarctic Division be doubled from the current level of approximately \$700,000 per annum for the remainder of the Science Strategy 2004/05-2008/09 and be reassessed after that period.

Disagree

The Government is committed to an effective and collaborative Australian Antarctic Science programme.

The total value of the grants received by research agencies under the Australian Antarctic Grants Scheme comprises the cash provided to the research agency supplemented by the logistical, field, station or shipboard support provided by the Australian Antarctic Division of the Department of the Environment and Water Resources. The in-kind support provided by the Australian Antarctic Division is in the order of \$250,000 to \$400,000 per project depending on the individual requirements of each research project.