

Chapter 2

Portfolio specific issues

2.1 This chapter provides an overview of some of the matters raised during the committee's hearings on the additional estimates 2013–14. The discussion follows outcome and agency structure.

Environment Portfolio

Department of the Environment

2.2 The committee opened the hearing with the Department of the Environment by asking general questions about:

- staffing reductions in the department as a consequence of the delegation of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) approvals to state governments (pp 5–6); and
- Nishi building office space (p. 6).

Outcome 1: The conservation and protection of Australia's terrestrial and marine biodiversity and ecosystems through supporting research, developing information, supporting natural resource management, and establishing and managing Commonwealth protected areas

2.3 Officers from the department were called in relation to Program 1.1: Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and the Environment. Matters raised included:

- 20 million trees project (p. 101);
- Caring for our Country program (pp 101–102);
- Green Army (p. 103);
- Tasmanian Forests Intergovernmental Agreement (p. 106);
- diversion of Natural Heritage Trust funds (pp 107–108);
- future of the National Landcare Program (pp 108–109);
- protection plans for the turtle and the dugong (pp 112–113); and
- Save the Tasmanian Devil Program (p. 112).

2.4 Officers from the department were called in relation to Program 1.2: Environmental information and research. Matters raised included whaling surveillance (pp 113–114); and the National Environmental Research Program (p. 115).

2.5 Officers from the department were called in relation to Program 1.3: Carbon Pollution Reduction. Matters raised included land sector initiatives – Biodiversity Fund (p. 117).

2.6 The committee welcomed the new Director of National Parks, Ms Sally Barnes. Ms Barnes commented on her new position as Director:

...I have some very big shoes to fill. I have come from the New South Wales government. I was the chief executive of the Office of Environment and Heritage. As part of that role, I had responsibility for managing New South Wales national parks. Before that role, I was the head of the National Parks and Wildlife Service in New South Wales. So it is an exciting time to come to the Commonwealth. Peter was in the role for 14 years. Obviously the Director of National Parks role does not come up very often. I was very keen to throw my hat into the ring and very pleased to be selected for the position.¹

2.7 The committee proceeded to question the Director of National Parks and canvassed matters including:

- the World Parks Congress (p. 67);
- Indigenous employment at Uluru (pp 67–68);
- Christmas Island commercial fishing area (p. 68); and
- deep water fishing licences and impacts (p. 68).

Outcome 2: Improved sustainability of Australia's population, communities and environment through coordination and development of sustainable population and communities policies, and the reduction and regulation of waste, pollutants and hazardous substances

2.8 Officers were called and examined in relation to Program 2.1: Management of Hazardous Wastes, Substances and Pollutants. Matters raised included:

- Tyre Stewardship Australia established by the tyre industry and the impact of the project on our natural environment (p. 13–15); and
- the e-waste scheme (p. 15).

2.9 The committee called departmental officers in relation to Program 2.2: Sustainable Communities and examined the expenditure for the establishment of the National Sustainability Council (p. 16).

1 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2014, p. 68.

Outcome 3: Advancement of Australia's strategic, scientific, environmental and economic interests in the Antarctic by protecting, administering and researching the region

2.10 The committee called agencies and departmental officers in relation to Program 3.1: Science, Policy and Presence. Matters raised included:

- the 20-year Antarctic strategic plan (pp 19–20);
- importance of the scientific research in the Antarctic around ocean acidification and funding of the research (p. 21);
- organisations and countries contributing financially to research (p. 21); and
- abandoned fuel drums at Wilkes Station and the Thala Valley waste disposal site (p. 22).

2.11 The committee discussed the costs for the use of the Aurora Australis to rescue passengers from the ship stuck in Antarctic ice in December 2013. The Australian Antarctic Division advised that the direct costs to the Australian Antarctic program were about \$1.8 million. Dr Tony Fleming, Director, advised the committee that the Australian Antarctic Division is attempting to recoup the costs.²

2.12 The Australian Antarctic Division also elaborated on the 20-year Antarctic strategic plan:

The 20-year Antarctic strategic plan has as its terms of reference the strategic importance of Australia's Antarctic interests, expanding the role of Tasmania as the gateway for Antarctic expeditions and scientific research, ensuring robust and reliable access to the Australian Antarctic Territory, extending Australia's reach across the Australian Antarctic Territory, committing to undertaking nationally and globally significant science, and committing to exercising influence in the region through the Antarctic treaty system. They are the terms of reference and you can see them on our website. There is further detail in those terms of reference.³

Outcome 4: Adaptation to climate change, wise water use, secure water supplies and improved health of rivers, waterways and freshwater ecosystems by supporting research, and reforming the management and use of water resources

2.13 Officers from the Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and departmental officers were called in relation to Program 4.1: Water Reform. Matters raised included:

- the release of the Constraints Management Strategy (p. 23);
- likely impacts of changes to river levels (p. 24);

2 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2014, p. 18.

3 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2014, p. 18.

- the involvement of the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder in relation to the constraints management strategy (p. 24);
- Sustainable Rural Water Use and Infrastructure Program (pp 24–25);
- funding allocated to South Australia under the PIPP(SA) program (pp 26–27);
- memorandums of understanding with Mekong River Commission and the Yellow River Conservancy Commission in China (p. 28); and
- Water for the Future program (p. 28).

Outcome 5: Increased protection, awareness and appreciation of Australia's environment and heritage through regulating matters of national environmental significance and the identification, conservation and celebration of natural, Indigenous and historic places of national and World Heritage significance

2.14 Officers from the department were called in relation to Program 5.1: Conservation of Australia's Heritage and Environment. Matters raised included:

- proposed boundary modification for the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (pp 68–69);
- identifying and collating the Aboriginal cultural values of the expanded World Heritage Area (p. 70);
- funding provided to the Tasmanian Government to commence the rehabilitation works on degraded forest areas (p. 70);
- the progress of the community consultations for the listing of Cape York as a World Heritage Area (p. 73);
- mining development in the Galilee Basin (p. 74);
- the progress, development and completion of the Government's heritage strategy (p. 75); and
- Dampier Archipelago and the Burrup Peninsula (pp 76–77).

2.15 The committee also sought details about obtaining a detailed map of the area proposed for delisting, and if the department would publish such a map on its website. The department responded:

...the standard practice is that we would not put up GPS coordinates for any maps that have been sent to the World Heritage committee prior to it considering the request from the state party and after it has made a decision. That has been standard practice for all nominations and proposals put to the World Heritage committee over recent years, because they can sometimes change depending on what the World Heritage committee might actually decide. So we would normally put up the really detailed GPS based

mapping after a final decision has been made by the World Heritage committee.⁴

2.16 Officers from the department were called and examined in relation to Program 5.2: Environmental Regulation. Matters raised included:

- progress of the process to delegate Commonwealth approval powers to the states (p. 78);
- actions the department has taken to implement the minister's review of marine parks (p. 82);
- studies on reducing the size of marine parks (p. 82);
- the impact of continued fishing within marine parks (p. 83);
- the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Environment) Amendment (2014 Measures No. 1) Regulation 2014 (p. 83);
- scrutiny undertaken on the West Australian Government's application for exemption from Part 3 of the EPBC Act (p. 83);
- Queensland drum lines (p. 83);
- number of sharks of any breed that have been caught—target and non-target species (p. 84);
- Waratah Coal approval in the Galilee Basin (p. 87);
- Maules Creek coalmine approval (pp 89–90);
- Abbot Point approval (p. 91);
- draft recovery plan for koalas (p. 91); and
- strategic environmental assessment being undertaken into the Perth and Peel regions (p. 92).

Outcome 6: Protection and restoration of environmental assets through the management and use of Commonwealth environmental water

2.17 Officers from the department were called in relation to Program 6.1: Commonwealth Environmental Water, together with officers from the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office. Matters raised included:

- environmental water holdings (p. 29);
- risk assessment processes for riverbanks (p. 30);
- Environmental Watering Plan and the implementation of the Constraints Management Strategy (p. 30); and
- sale of the environmental water in the Gwydir Valley (pp 31–32).

4 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2014, p. 69.

Outcome 7: Reduction of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions, adaptation to the impacts of climate change, and contribution towards the negotiation of an effective global solution to climate change, through the development and implementation of a national response to climate change

2.18 In relation to Program 7.1: Reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions, matters raised included:

- consideration of the development of the safeguards mechanism (p. 39);
- funding for the one million solar roofs, solar schools and solar towns programs (p. 40);
- the progress and success of the Renewable Energy Target review (RET) (p. 40)
- impact on investment in renewables of removing the RET (p. 41);
- abolition of the Clean Energy Finance Corporation and investment in renewables in Australia (p. 41);
- the role of the department in the RET review process (p. 42);
- the abolition of the Climate Change Authority (CCA) (pp 42–43); and
- Galilee Basin coal deposits (p. 48).

2.19 During questioning under Program 7.2: Adapting to Climate Change, matters raised included:

- moves by local councils to remove regulations preventing building developments near the coastal areas at risk of rising sea levels (p. 55);
- potential sea level rises (pp 55–56);
- drought in New South Wales and Queensland (p. 57);
- twenty million trees program (p. 59); and
- funding for the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (p. 60).

2.20 The committee also canvassed issues related to heatwaves across south-east Australia with the department commenting on heat-related illness and death:

Broadly, the department is aware of the general implications of the extreme weather that Australia has experienced in the last few years. Clearly, increasing heat and heatwaves have had a significant impact on human health, particularly in 2009 and 2010. We have actively been informed about the implications of the number of excess deaths, for example, which were reported in the Victorian heatwave in 2009–10. So we are aware of that. Since that time, I think the department, in working closely with both the health and the family services departments, has explored the implications and benefits of an early warning heatwave system. I understand

the Bureau of Meteorology now has a role in putting in place and piloting a heatwave early warning system.⁵

2.21 The committee questioned the Supervising Scientist Division on the Alligator Rivers Regional Technical Committee and its role. Acting Supervising Scientist, Mr Richard McAllister, explained that:

The Alligator Rivers Regional Technical Committee is a committee of seven independent scientists who essentially oversight the research undertaken into impacts of the environment in the Alligator Rivers region with specific relation to the uranium mining activities in the region. They essentially oversight the research that both ourselves and the mining company undertake and give an independent view of that and report directly to the minister with that independent view.⁶

2.22 Other matters raised included:

- the failure and spillage of leach tank No. 1 on 7 December (pp 61–63);
- radiation readings undertaken by Energy Resources Australia (ERA) (p. 64);
- incident on 3 November involving and unauthorised vehicle movement (p. 65); and
- inadequately secured exploration samples (pp 65–66).

Bureau of Meteorology

2.23 The Bureau of Meteorology was called and examined on matters including:

- Blue Mountains bush fires (p. 8);
- summer heat wave events (p. 8);
- use of the Bureau of Meteorology website during the heat waves (p. 11);
- forecasting tropical Cyclone Dillon (pp 12–13);
- requirements for providing information through the media and generally reporting to the community (pp 10–11); and
- radar maps and anomalous information on radar images (pp 11–12).

2.24 In relation to extreme weather events, the Director, Dr Rob Vertessy, advised the committee about particular climatic trends:

I will start with the clearest evidence, which is around temperature. The globe has warmed almost a degree since the beginning of the last century. Accompanying that growth in average warmth of the planet has been a growing frequency of hot days and a lesser frequency of cool nights. So

5 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2014, p. 56.

6 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2014, pp 60–61.

there is very clear evidence to show that global warming is impacting on temperature distributions. When we come to rainfall, it is a little less clear. In the Australian region we have been getting a little more rainfall on average. However, the signal in rainfall is very noisy. So it is difficult to discern any kind of global warming trend in the pattern of rainfall in our region. When it comes to cyclones, we have similar difficulties discerning any trend because of there being a lot of variability in the cyclone frequency and magnitude. There are a lot of them and if anything we are either holding steady or there has been a slight decline in the number of cyclones since the 1970s. But the research on that is quite equivocal.⁷

Clean Energy Regulator

2.25 Officers from the Clean Energy Regulator were called and examined in relation to:

- media reports in relation to cancellation of the auctions of carbon units (p. 50);
- activities undertaken as part of the clean energy package (p. 51);
- annual compliance and risk based audit processes (pp 52–53); and
- revenue from the carbon price (p. 55).

Climate Change Authority

2.26 The committee called and examined officers from the Climate Change Authority and canvassed matters including:

- progress of the emissions reduction target review (p. 118);
- Carbon Farming Initiative (p. 118);
- the effect of the RET on wholesale electricity prices in Australia (p. 120); and
- economic modelling for the review of the RET (p. 123).

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

2.27 Officers from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) were called and examined. Matters raised included:

- Abbot Point offshore dumping (pp 92–94); and
- Great Barrier Reef Climate Change Action Plan (p. 96).

2.28 The committee continued to question the GBRMPA on the Abbot Point offshore dumping and the role that the GBRMA has in ensuring that appropriate

7 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2014, p. 9.

information is available about activities being undertaken.⁸ The Chairman and Chief Executive, Dr Russell Reichelt, elaborated:

Our role in a decision like Abbot Point is to say yes or no and ask, 'Can it be done safely,' in plain terms. That involves identifying all the risks that, if unmanaged, would cause harm and then, same as the minister's decision, making sure there are conditions to prevent that occurring, and that is what we have done. But we have also been meeting with the community groups. In the last two weeks, we have met with our local management advisory committees and senior executives, and to those people I would say, 'We are hearing your concerns and we do need to get more information out to you quickly.' That is so that they understand not just the scientific rigour behind the controls that we have put in place but the independence—so the information is transparently available to the community and they hear it the same as we do, and to avoid secrecy agreements and things that prevent their representatives from talking to them about it. We intend to ramp that up in the case of Abbot Point. My colleague mentioned the technical panel and the management group, which would have community people on it.⁹

National Water Commission

2.29 Officers from the National Water Commission (NWC) were called and examined. Matters raised included:

- the triennial assessment of progress under the National Water Initiative (p. 34); and
- the publication of benchmark price (p. 37).

Communications Portfolio

Department of Communications

2.30 General questions were asked of the department in relation to:

- methodology for calculating the cost to industry of the regulation administered by the department (p. 3);
- costing regulation (p. 3);
- staffing in the E-government Branch (p. 4); and
- the role of the chief economist (pp 5–6).

8 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2014, p. 99.

9 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2014, p. 100.

Outcome 1: Develop a vibrant, sustainable and internationally competitive broadband, broadcasting and communications sector, through policy development, advice and program delivery, which promotes the digital economy for all Australians

2.31 Officers from the department were called and examined in relation to Program 1.1: Broadband and Communications Infrastructure. Matters raised included:

- the prioritised rollout and the broadband survey (p. 17);
- access to Telstra's 3G to 4G network (p. 21);
- the release of a broadband quality and availability report on the myBroadband website (pp 23–24);
- premises having inadequate or no broadband (p. 27); and
- Interim Satellite Service (pp 31–32).

2.32 Officers from the department were called in relation to Program 1.2: Digital Economy and Postal Services. Matters raised included:

- Strategic Review of the National Broadband Network (p. 97); and
- postal services – corporate plan (p. 98).

2.33 Officers from the department were called in relation to Program 1.3: Broadcasting and Digital Television. Matters raised included:

- reviews on technology choices for radio (p. 121); and
- extending digital radio to regional areas of Australia (pp 122–123).

Australia Post

2.34 Officers from Australia Post were called and examined at the conclusion of the opening statement made by Mr Ahmed Fahour, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer. Matters raised included:

- changes in the delivery schedule survey (p. 77);
- basic postage rate price increase (p. 79);
- provision of 60 cent concession stamp (p. 78);
- declining mail services (p. 80);
- declining service standards (p. 80);
- competition with existing businesses (p. 95); and
- digital mailboxes (pp 95–96).

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

2.35 The committee canvassed the following matters with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC):

- broadcast of New Year's Eve celebrations, Sydney and complaints received (pp 101–102);
- ABC children's programs and relocation of Giggle and Hoot (p. 102);
- Stone Cold Justice, Four Corners program (p. 102);
- the ABC's correction policy (pp 104–105);
- television production outside of Sydney and Melbourne (pp 106–107);
- additional services for regional areas for digital radio, including rollout of digital transmission towers (p. 110); and
- Centenary of Navy Fireworks Display on Sydney Harbour (p. 111).

Australian Communications and Media Authority

2.36 Officers from the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) were called and examined. Matters raised included:

- the role ACMA plays in enforcing content standards in the broadcasting sector (p. 7);
- number of investigations instigated by ACMA into broadcasts by Ray Hadley and by Alan Jones in 2013 (p. 7)
- the replacement of the chief economist (p. 9); and
- number of complaints received (pp 14–15).

National Broadband Network (NBN Co)

2.37 Officers from the National Broadband Network (NBN Co) were called and examined. The Executive Chairman, Dr Ziggy Switkowski, tabled his opening statement. Matters raised included:

- cable rollout trajectories for NBN (pp 37–38).
- long-term satellite availability (p. 48);
- investments in satellites (p. 51);
- Freedom of Information requests (p. 64);
- take up of the rollout of NBN (p. 74); and
- impact of regional rollout (p. 75).

Special Broadcasting Service

2.38 Officers from Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) were called and examined. Matters raised included:

- obligations of SBS as a national television broadcaster (p. 118);
- Mandarin News Australia (pp. 118–119);
- PopAsia followings on Facebook and Twitter (p. 120); and
- SBS participation in digital radio trials (p. 120).

Senator John Williams
Chair