

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee
Answers to questions on notice
Environment portfolio

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Hearing: Additional Estimates
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Programme: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
Topic: Global coral bleaching
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Senator Siewert asked:

Senator SIEWERT: I am asking particularly about this global event, and I will come back to the comment you made about local conditions in a minute. But for the current global event over this summer period you do not have an idea, really, of how much is affected.

Dr Reichelt: That is my understanding, but I could not give you a specific amount.

Senator SIEWERT: When are you likely to, or will you?

Dr Reichelt: The way the monitoring is being done, it is done regionally, principally by AIMS in their long-term monitoring program. We see their reports every few months as they cover an area. We have recently seen one for the Innisfail and Cairns area. During this session we can check whether that contains specific statistics. It may be that for some quite substantial areas there are statistics and I just do not have them in my briefing.

Senator SIEWERT: If you could check before the end, that would be great.

Dr Reichelt: I will.

Senator SIEWERT: If you cannot, or if you need to update it, could you take on notice if at all you will have an idea, and when you will have an idea, of what is the impact of this particular global event.

Answer:

Sea surface temperatures are currently above average in many areas of the Great Barrier Reef, due to a combination of climate change, the recent strong El Niño and recent local weather patterns. These conditions create an elevated risk of coral bleaching, including the possibility of mass bleaching.

Low level coral bleaching has been observed on more than 40 reefs along the length of the Reef, however mass bleaching has not occurred as at 2 March 2016. This minor, but widespread bleaching triggers 'Response Level 1' in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's Coral Bleaching Risk and Impact Assessment Plan. As part of this response, we are conducting in-water site inspections in the far northern area. The agency is also gathering information through its monitoring network with partners in the science and tourism communities.

Local to regional weather during March will dictate how much further bleaching occurs and whether or not there is mass bleaching. Sea surface temperatures are predicted to remain above average during March, and are likely to result in increased bleaching with the possibility of a mass bleaching event still remaining.

The current bleaching may not peak in severity and extent until late March or even later. At this time the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and its science partners will determine how much resource to invest in surveying the Reef.

A number of programs including the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan, the Reef Trust and Queensland's own investments continue to support a healthier and more resilient Reef system in the face of stressors such as coral bleaching.