

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

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Hearing: Budget Estimates

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Programme: Bureau of Meteorology (BoM)

Topic: Environmental Information Program

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Senator Waters asked:

Senator WATERS: I have a final few questions on a different topic. There was a program called the Environmental Information Program. My understanding is that BoM was in charge of it, and I think it expired last year. Do you know if anyone is doing that work now?

Dr Vertessy: No, it has not expired. It became an ongoing measure for the bureau.

Senator WATERS: Can you tell me more about that?

Dr Vertessy: Yes, I can. It is a small program. It resides within our environment and research division. It is undertaking a few things. It is the home of our so-called eReefs activity, which I believe you asked us about before. We are working with the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, the Queensland government, AIMS, the Great Barrier Marine Park Authority and CSIRO to build a suite of different technologies that can help to more sensitively manage the Great Barrier Reef. Through that Environmental Information Program we have put together one operational product, and that is the marine water quality dashboard, which basically takes remote sensing data from satellites and produces maps of water quality in the Great Barrier Reef lagoon each day. So you can go onto the bureau's website now and every day see an updated map of what the water quality conditions are. That has been one of the products that we have produced under the program. We are now working on a hydrodynamic model for the Great Barrier Reef so that we can forecast what the circulation patterns will be in the Great Barrier Reef lagoon seven days ahead. That is work that is ongoing.

In other areas of the Environmental Information Program we have been looking at things like developing data sharing standards and policies, and working with federal agencies to understand their environmental information needs, and developing those data sharing technologies. They are a few examples of the things that are under way.

Senator WATERS: Can you clarify the funding situation? There was \$18 million for BoM over four years, and that funding came to an end in 2013-14. You say it is now an ongoing program. Does that mean you do not have any specific money dedicated to it?

Dr Vertessy: No, it was an ongoing measure.

Senator WATERS: What is the quantum of that?

Ms Middleton: I would say it is about a third of that, so it is in the order of \$3 million to \$4 million.

Dr Vertessy: Yes, I think it is running at about \$3 million to \$4 million per year. There is a little bit of extra money in the original measure to do some capital builds of some data infrastructure. We can give you the precise figure on notice.

Senator WATERS: Thank you. Can you tell me how much funding and staff time are currently allocated to consolidating environmental information on a continental scale, especially as regards biodiversity?

Dr Vertessy: It is pretty small. Again, I would have to look into that and we could give you a detailed answer.

Senator WATERS: Thank you; I would appreciate that. Specifically, whether there is anyone dedicated to that or whether it is just a responsibility shared amongst a few folk, and what resourcing they have available to them.

Dr Vertessy: I can certainly clarify one thing: we are not in the process of gathering and collating environmental information for the continent. Really, we are focused more on the standards and the technologies for doing it, such that other people can work together in what you might call a federated system whereby we are all doing our own bit and are able to share one another's data.

Answer:

The funding for the National Plan for Environmental Information initiative totalled \$16.7 million over the 2010-11 to 2013-14 financial years. It became an ongoing measure in 2014-15 and funding is now of the order of \$1.961 million per annum.

The Bureau is active in developing and promoting technologies that help agencies to openly share their environmental data. This is being accomplished through the roll-out of the National Environmental Information Infrastructure (see

<http://www.bom.gov.au/environment/activities/infrastructure.shtml>). However, there is no specific funding or staff under the National Plan for Environmental Information initiative currently allocated to consolidating environmental information on a continental scale

The Bureau undertook a small joint study with CSIRO Ecosystem Sciences and the Atlas of Living Australia, in 2012-13, to determine the key components necessary for developing a national biodiversity monitoring capability that would support consolidation of biodiversity information on a continental scale (see <http://www.bom.gov.au/environment/doc/biodiversity-profiling.pdf>). The Atlas of Living Australia, which is a facility under the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy, continues as an aggregator of biodiversity data from multiple sources across the nation.