AGENCY/DEPARTMENT: Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS)

TOPIC: National Sea Simulator

REFERENCE: Question on Notice (Hansard, 26 February 2015, pages 81-82)

QUESTION No.: AI-1

Senator WATERS: Thank you for your responses to my questions on notice around your funding and your research activities. First of all, I want to take you to one of those answers. I have got QoN SI-125 here with me, which you answered and discussed the National Sea Simulator. You noted in that response that your budget has been cut by $7.8 million over the forwards and that you therefore had to scale back parts of your research, particularly the strategic research. I want to firstly go to that National Sea Simulator. Can you just explain in general terms what that program actually does?

Mr Gunn: The National Sea Simulator is in fact a piece of infrastructure rather than a project in itself. We claim it is the most sophisticated experimental facility available to the topic of marine science anywhere in the world. It allows us to do a very broad range of experimental studies ranging from climate change through to ecotoxicology looking at crown of thorns larval survival, et cetera. In talking about the impacts of a budget reduction, what we are really talking about is the ability to use that facility to conduct science projects rather than in any way talking about the base running of that facility. We actually have funds in our appropriation budget to keep the water flowing and the control systems working.

Senator WATERS: Can you talk about the work on dredging and dumping and the information that the simulator can reveal to us on that?

Mr Gunn: What I can outline is the first stages of the work that we are doing in the sea simulator. This is research funded from the Western Australian Marine Science Institution in Western Australia. Its objective is to look at the tolerance of different tropical organisms such as sponges, coral, et cetera, to different types of dredged soil or dredge impact. In its early stages, what we have been able to do is establish an experimental set-up that allows us to simulate different types of dredge operations and then, using some of the stock of corals and sponges in our collections, we are able to then put those organisms through a range of different types of experimental conditions. Those results are yet to be completed, but we are hoping to have something published within the next 12 to 18 months.

Senator WATERS: You mentioned that the impact of the funding cuts was not that you could not run the simulator anymore, because you are able to keep it ticking over, but it was more the projects that you could apply it to. Could you tell me which particular projects or what work has been either delayed, reduced or dropped because of that $7.8 million funding reduction over the forwards?

Mr Gunn: I have put some of that on record previously at Senate estimates. What would probably be worth outlining is that the dredging experiment I described a minute ago is going ahead because we can essentially use the budget that we have for the sea simulator and supplement that with the money that is being provided by the Western Australian Marine Science Institution. All good research organisations have many more ideas than their research scientists can do. Each year we call for proposals from our own scientists to conduct what I call early stage research with the sea simulator, research that is not ready to provide advice to the government or into industry. We invite them to put proposals up. In effect, we cannot fund as many of those projects as we would if we had not had a cut.

Senator WATERS: Can you perhaps take on notice to list those projects that you have been unable to fund that you would have perhaps deemed worthy to fund had the means been there?

ANSWER

This question was addressed in response to written question SI-123 following the October 2014 Senate Estimates.