

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

Question No: 202
Hearing: Additional Budget Estimates
Outcome: Agency
Programme: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
Topic: Dredging in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park
Hansard Page: N/A
Question Date: 4 March 2014
Question Type: Written

Senator Urquhart asked:

1. Who did you consult during the assessment to grant North Queensland Bulk Ports Corporation a permit to dump 3m cubic metres of dredge spoil in the GBR World Heritage Area?
2. What was the advice from the scientific community?
3. What was the advice from the tourism industry?
4. What was the advice from the fishing industry?
5. What was the advice from conservationists?

Answer:

1. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) consults with stakeholders on a range of issues associated with management of the Marine Park. With regard to this particular project the proponent undertook the majority of the consultation; as required by the Terms of Reference of the Environmental Impact Statement. The GBRMPA listened to the views and consulted with key stakeholders groups and individuals including Department of the Environment, Australian Institute of Marine Science, North Queensland Bulk Ports, GVK, Adani, environmental consultants, conservation groups, tourism and fishing industries.

The Public Environment Report (PER) was released for public consultation in January and February 2013. In total there were 103 submissions received.

The GBRMPA listed the project on our website, provided information to Reef and Local Marine Advisory Committees, met with many stakeholders and corresponded by letter, email and telephone with over 4,000 individuals.

Due to the breadth of consultation undertaken and the volume of feedback provided, it is not possible provide details of all of the feedback provided. The responses quoted below are indicative of general feedback provided in each category.

2. The GBRMPA considers contemporary scientific knowledge when assessing and considering permit applications. Depending on the complexity of the proposal, we may also engage the scientific community to aid with our assessment. This is in addition to any scientific studies undertaken by the proponent as part of their application. In the case of the Abbot Point assessment and decision, we engaged the Australian Institute of Marine Science regarding the technical aspects of the Public Environment Report. “The reviewers found that based on the information contained in the PER, the Supplementary PER and the associated appendices, and using contemporary scientific knowledge, there is significant uncertainty in the magnitude and spatial extent of impacts associated with the proposed activity to dispose of 3,000,000 m³ of dredge material to the marine park.” This uncertainty was taken into account in the GBRMPA’s decision and reflected in the permit conditions.

We received advice and opinion from organisations and individuals during 2013 and early 2014 during the assessment phase, many of whom were not specialists in relevant scientific fields. The general thrust of the advice from the broader scientific community was summarised in a letter received by the GBRMPA dated 28 January 2014 stating that “the best available science ...makes it very clear that expansion of the port at Abbot Point will have detrimental effects on the Great Barrier Reef.” The letter also expressed concerns with the proposed offsets program. Their general concerns were not based on the specifics of Abbot Point and were similar to those raised in previous risk assessments and were also taken into account in the decision. Other more general concerns raised included climate change, reef resilience, coal exportation, future greenhouse emissions and increases in shipping.

3. We received advice from tourism organisations and individuals during 2013 and early 2014 during the assessment phase.

The Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators (AMPTO) released a report in December 2013 titled “A review of dredging impacts on the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area”. The main concern from the tourism industry is possible impacts to the Whitsundays (40 kilometres to the south). The advice from some members of the tourism industry was in relation to possible conditions that could be imposed on a potential permit. These conditions were mostly included. A letter dated 14 January 2014 from the major tourism industry associations stated that the GBRMPA decisions must be based on environmental outcomes and demand best environmental practices from all users of the marine park.

4. We received advice from fishing organisations and individuals during 2013 and early 2014 during the assessment phase.

In a letter to Minister Tony Burke dated 7 February 2013, the Queensland Seafood Industry Association (QSIA) stated that “the Queensland Seafood Industry Association believes that the development of the Abbot Point expansion project will have significant environmental impacts within and adjacent to the project footprint and beyond. These environmental impacts will exacerbate the social and economic concerns held by commercial fishers and the QSIA. The letter provides details on the species mostly likely to be impacted by the expansion of the Abbot Point terminal and the impacts to recreational fishers.

5. A letter dated 24 January 2013 from the leaders of some of Australia's prominent environment groups (including WWF, Australian Marine Conservation Society, Greenpeace, Australian Conservation Foundation, GetUp, Humane Society International) stated that "given the current parlous state of the Reef and the longer term risk to the Reef from climate change, we believe that actions now must overwhelmingly swing in favour of protection. We consider that issuing a dumping permit for this development would be a fundamental breach of the duties and office you hold and it would let down the majority of Australians who put their trust in GBRMPA to protect the Reef." It concludes that "refusing any further capital dredge dumping permits would be a significant start".