

Chapter 2

Portfolio specific issues

2.1 This chapter provides an overview of the matters raised during the committee's budget estimates hearings for 2014–15. The discussion followed outcome and agency structure. *The page references beside each matter refer to the proof committee transcript.*

Environment portfolio

Department of the Environment

2.2 The committee began the first day of hearings with general questions to the Department of the Environment. Dr Gordon de Brouwer, Secretary of the Department of the Environment, noted that the number and description of outcomes for the department had changed and that seven outcomes had been consolidated into four (p. 5). The matters raised by the committee included:

- the reduction in staffing levels through voluntary redundancies, carrying out a capability assessment of staff and limiting recruitment to meet budgetary and workload requirements (pp 6–18); and
- the proposed restructure of the department (p. 18).

Outcome 1: Conserve, protect and sustainably manage Australia's biodiversity, ecosystems, environment and heritage through research, information management, supporting natural resource management, establishing and managing Commonwealth Protected areas, and reducing and regulating the use of pollutants and hazardous substances.

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

- Green Army operations and priority projects (pp 86–90 and 96–98);
- the Grants to Voluntary Environment, Sustainability and Heritage Organisations (GVESHO) program (p. 88 and 100–102);
- the Whale and Dolphin Protection Plan (p. 89);
- Coastal River Recovery Initiatives (p. 90);
- marine debris (pp 92–93);
- the National Landcare Program (pp 93–96); and
- the Australian Government Reef Program (pp 99–100).

2.4 Officers of the department were called in relation to Program 1.2: Environmental Information and Research. Matters raised included the National Environmental Science Program (pp 70–73) and whale research (pp 73–78).

2.5 Officers of the department were called in relation to Program 1.3: Carbon Pollution Reduction—Land Sector Initiatives. The discussion covered natural resource management planning for climate change (p. 78).

2.6 Matters raised in relation to Program 1.4: Conservation of Australia's Heritage and the Environment included:

- the potential World Heritage listing of royal reserves (p. 18);
- the Parramatta Female Factory site (pp 19–20);
- the request to delist part of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (pp 22–26 and 35–36);
- Community Heritage and Icons Grants (p. 27); and
- the Great Barrier Reef (pp 32–34).

2.7 Officers of the department were called in relation to Program 1.5: Environmental Regulation. Matters raised included:

- the proposed accreditation of state and territory environmental approval processes (pp 41–50 and 56–62);
- the National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority (NOPSEMA) (pp 51–53); and
- Abbot Point (pp 53–56).

2.8 In relation to Program 1.6: Management of Hazardous Wastes, Substances and Pollutants, questions covered the Packaging Impacts Decision Regulation Impact Statement (pp 65–69) and Tyre Stewardship Australia (pp 69–70).

Outcome 2: Reduce Australia's greenhouse gas emissions, adapt to the impacts of climate change and contribute to the negotiation of an effective global solution to climate change, through developing and implementing a national response to climate change.

2.9 Officers of the department were called in relation to Program 2.1: Reducing Australia's Greenhouse Gas Emissions. Matters raised included:

- the Emissions Reduction Fund (pp 70–81);
- Solar Towns (pp 81–82);
- the Direct Action Plan (pp 82–86);
- fugitive emissions (pp 86–88); and
- the carbon tax (pp 88–90).

2.10 Matters raised in relation to Program 2.2: Adapting to Climate Change included the Australian Community Climate and Earth-System Simulator (ACCESS) (p. 98) and the Natural Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (p. 99).

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

2.11 The committee called officers of the department from the Australian Antarctic Division and canvassed matters including:

- the replacement of the *Aurora Australis* icebreaker (p. 33);
- maintaining Australia's presence in the Antarctic (pp 33–35 and 39–40); and
- the stability of the Antarctic ice sheets (pp 37–38).

Outcome 4: Improve the health of rivers and freshwater ecosystems and water use efficiency through implementing water reforms, and ensuring enhanced sustainability, efficiency and productivity in the management and use of water resources.

2.12 Officers of the department were called in relation to Program 4.1: Water Reform. Matters raised included:

- the Sustainable Rural Water Use and Infrastructure Program (SRWUIP) (p. 40);
- the National Performance Report (pp 45 and 47–48); and
- the National Water Initiative (pp 48–50).

2.13 The committee called officers of the department in relation to Program 4.2: Commonwealth Environmental Water, together with officers from the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office (CEWO). The matters raised are outlined in paragraph 2.18 below.

Bureau of Meteorology

2.14 Officers from the Bureau of Meteorology provided information on the installation of a new supercomputer (pp 20–23). Dr Rob Vertessy, Director of Meteorology, outlined the anticipated benefits of the supercomputer, which include pinpointing finer details in weather systems and providing more up-to-date forecasts. Dr Vertessy stated:

...for the first time, we will be able to run the models in on-demand mode. If a sudden severe weather event breaks out somewhere in the country, we will be able to spin up the model to run a simulation just for that event. In fact, we will be able to do that for four concurrent events at a time. So, whether we have cyclones, floods, fire, thunderstorms or volcanic ash events to the north happening, we will be able to set the model up to run a specialised, on-demand forecast for our emergency services. That is going to be an amazing step change.¹

2.15 Other matters raised included:

- revenue-raising activities (pp 25–27);

1 Dr Rob Vertessy, Director of Meteorology, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 26 May 2014, p. 23.

- El Nino (p. 29);
- web services and proposed smartphone apps (pp 26 and 31); and
- the bureau's use of volunteers, since 1908, to monitor rainfall, storms and river heights (p. 29).

Clean Energy Regulator

2.16 The committee called officers from the Clean Energy Regulator and questioned them on changes to the regulator's role and functions following the implementation of the Emissions Reduction Fund (pp 92–96).

Climate Change Authority

2.17 In light of the proposal to abolish the Climate Change Authority in 2014–15, the committee questioned officers on matters including:

- the transfer of the authority's staff and functions to other agencies (pp 36–38); and
- the completion of emissions reduction projects currently being undertaken by the authority (pp 38–41).

Commonwealth Environmental Water Office

2.18 Officers from the Commonwealth Environmental Water Office were questioned on current water holdings (p. 56), water trading in the Gwydir and Peel valleys (pp 56–59) and water plans (pp 59–60).

Director of National Parks

2.19 The Director of National Parks appeared before the committee and reported on the need to achieve a balance in working with the states to integrate tourism, conservation and opportunities for traditional owners. Ms Sally Barnes, Director of National Parks, stated:

We will continue to work together under the National Landscapes Program to link the best of the best, the best of nature, as a marketable icon for Tourism Australia to promote overseas...Our joint management strategy will look not only at tourism but at where there are other opportunities for Aboriginal corporations and groups to provide services to us to deliver on park.²

2.20 Other matters canvassed with the Director of National Parks included:

- the World Parks Congress (p. 13); and
- the visit to Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge (p. 14).

2 Ms Sally Barnes, Director of National Parks, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 27 May 2014, p. 12.

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

2.21 The committee called officers from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Matters raised included:

- five major initiatives for the authority (pp 103–104);
- Traditional Use Marine Resource Agreements (p. 106); and
- dredging at Abbot Point (pp 110–113).

Murray-Darling Basin Authority

2.22 The committee called officers of the Murray-Darling Basin Authority and examined matters including:

- water buybacks for the Murray-Darling Basin Plan (pp 61–62);
- cost-sharing between the Commonwealth and states to maintain river assets (pp 64–67);
- the Private Irrigation Infrastructure Program for South Australia (PIIP-SA) (p. 67); and
- the Menindee Lakes project (pp 68–70).

National Water Commission

2.23 The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment, Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham, thanked staff of the National Water Commission for their valuable work, in recognition of the fact that the commission will cease operations in 2014–15. The committee questioned officers of the commission in relation to the transfer of the commission's functions to other agencies (pp 43–53), the impacts of mining on groundwater (pp 53–54) and the review of the Water Act (pp 54–55).

Office of the Supervising Scientist

2.24 The committee examined officers from the Office of the Supervising Scientist on matters including:

- the ongoing rehabilitation of Ranger Uranium Mine (pp 5–7);
- investigations into a leach tank failure in December 2013 (pp 7–9); and
- the failure and replacement of a ventilation shaft (p. 10).

Sydney Harbour Federation Trust

2.25 The committee examined officers of the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust on matters including revenue from leased properties, guided tours and paid parking (p. 15), and the proposed use of a trust site for an aged-care facility (pp 15–18).

Communications portfolio

Department of Communications

2.26 The committee began its examination of the Communications portfolio with general questions to the Department of Communications. Matters raised included:

- the restructure of the department (pp 3–8 and 13); and
- the Deregulation Roadmap 2014 (pp 9–11 and 14).

Outcome 1: Promote an innovative and competitive communications sector, through policy development, advice and program delivery, so all Australians can realise the full potential of digital technologies and communications services.

2.27 Officers of the department were called in relation to Program 1.1: Broadband and Communications Infrastructure. Matters raised included:

- NBN Co funding, corporate plan and broadband rollout (pp 41–55 and 56–75);
- the functions of the Telecommunications Universal Service Management Agency (pp 55–56); and
- the Mobile Black Spot Program (pp 75–79).

2.28 Matters raised in questioning under Program 1.2: Digital Economy and Postal Services included:

- e-Government (pp 70–72);
- the reform of postal services (pp 76–78); and
- the review of the spectrum policy and management framework (pp 78–79).

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

- the Deregulation Roadmap 2014 (pp 15–17);
- appointments to the ABC and SBS boards (pp 17–19);
- the review of the spectrum policy and management framework (pp 19–21); and
- the ABC and SBS efficiency study (pp 21–24 and 26–27).

Australia Post

2.30 Mr Ahmed Fahour, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, made an opening statement on the proposed changes to Australia Post's business, at the conclusion of which the committee questioned officers on matters including:

- mail delivery options (pp 82–86);
- profit, loss and superannuation liability (pp 87–96);
- StarTrack (pp 96–97);
- licensed post offices (pp 98–111); and

- MyPost digital mailbox (pp 111–112).

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

2.31 The committee canvassed the following matters with the ABC:

- legal action taken against the *Chaser* (pp 29–31 and 55–57);
- the ABC and SBS efficiency study (pp 36–39 and 58–61);
- the cessation of the Australia Network (pp 41–45, 51–54 and 63); and
- reporting bias (pp 57–58 and 66–68).

Australian Communications and Media Authority

2.32 Officers of ACMA were called and examined on matters including:

- cyber safety programs for schools (pp 5–6);
- the deregulation of reporting for telecommunications providers (pp 8–10 and 13–16); and
- the spectrum review (pp 16–18).

NBN Co

2.33 Officers of NBN Co were called and examined, following an opening statement by Mr Bill Morrow, Chief Executive Officer. Matters raised included:

- the Chief Executive Officer's previous employment (pp 81–96);
- the progress of the National Broadband Network rollout (pp 96–99 and 115–126);
- the coverage and potential use of satellite services (pp 99–107);
- equal access for retail service providers (pp 109–112); and
- services to remote communities (pp 114–115).

Special Broadcasting Service

2.34 Officers from the Special Broadcasting Service were questioned on matters including:

- the ABC and SBS efficiency study (pp 21–28 and 30);
- Eurovision 2014 and the soccer World Cup 2014 (pp 28–29); and
- the diversity of language programs (pp 19–20).

2.35 In response to a question on programming, Mr Michael Ebeid, Managing Director, commented that SBS Radio broadcasts in 74 languages. When asked whether any comparable broadcaster provides as many different language programs, Mr Ebeid stated:

We understand that the next closest organisation that does many languages would be the Vatican. The Vatican has 32 languages. Our former chairman

used to often use the line that we do double the number of languages that the voice of God does.³

Telecommunications Universal Service Management Agency

2.36 Officers from the Telecommunications Universal Service Management Agency were called and examined on matters including:

- the National Relay Service (p. 31);
- the transfer of TUSMA's operations to the Department of Communications (pp 32–35 and 39–40); and
- the migration of voice services to the National Broadband Network (pp 35 and 37–39).

Senator John Williams
Chair

3 Mr Michael Ebeid, Managing Director SBS, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 29 May 2014, p 20.