

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Supplementary Budget Estimates October 2009
Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Question: LWA 01

Division/Agency: Land & Water Australia

Topic: LWA wind-up

Hansard Page: 47 (19/10/09)

Senator MILNE asked:

Senator MILNE—I saw on an update that was made available that 10 per cent of the projects being conducted by Land and Water Australia had to be terminated. Can you indicate which of those programs were terminated?

Dr Robinson—At the time of the announcement, there were about 150 projects on our books. About 50 of those were in what we have called ongoing programs, like the National Program for Sustainable Irrigation, that have found new managing agents. Of the remaining approximately 100, yes, we had to terminate about 10, based on the amount of funding that we had left. I cannot give you the 10 now, but those projects are detailed on the annual operational plan, which is also available on the website.

Senator MILNE—So you cannot tell me what they were?

Dr Robinson—I can take that on notice, to give you that particular list.

Answer:

The following nine projects were terminated:

1. Characterising the Effects of River Regulation
2. Environmental Water Allocation Program Mid-term review and Environmental Water Research Mapping
3. What's Around the Bend for Murray Darling Basin
4. Flows and Aquatic Plants
5. Hydraulic Habitat of Inland Rivers
6. Understanding Multiple Human Impacts
7. Empowering Land Managers with Wireless
8. Monitoring and Evaluation of LWA's Social and Institutional Research Program (SIRP)
9. National Program for Sustainable Irrigation (NPSI) Knowledge Harvest

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Question: LWA 02

Division/Agency: Land and Water Australia

Topic: LWA wind-up

Hansard Page: 48 (19/10/09)

Senator Back asked:

Senator BACK—I think you also told us at the last Senate estimates that there were a number of PhD students. Was it 26 or 27 or more?

Dr Robinson—We had 20 PhDs, if I recall correctly, on the books at the time of our closure. All of those—bar one, which was terminated after being on hold for several years — essentially, were converted to grant funding so that those PhDs could continue. We put a high priority on making sure that they would continue in some form.

Senator BACK—So they are continuing their studies. Can you give us an idea which agencies they may have transferred to?

Dr Robinson—Essentially we converted those contracts to grants to be administered by their home university.

Senator BACK—Grants to their home universities?

Dr Robinson—Yes. Under our PhD system we would fund and contract a university—essentially the student would be at that university. Our funds, instead of being a contractual arrangement, are now a grant arrangement. So the university has the funding to manage those PhDs from this point on. So they are fully funded through to the end of their PhDs.

Senator BACK—They are fully funded through to the completion of their doctorate. Could you give us some idea now or on notice what that grant figure may have totalled?

Dr Robinson—Sure. I will have to take that on notice.

Senator BACK—Perhaps you could also take on notice what the cost has been to date of the 36 redundancies or what you predict the full cost of the 41 to be. I am anxious to know—I am not sure whether I got the answer—whether government has retained or lost much of the skill that existed within those 36, and you can answer that for the other five as well.

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Question: LWA 02 (continued)

Answer:

27 PhDs were funded by LWA at the time of closure announcement, of which 21 were converted to grants to be administered by host University, 5 were managed to completion by LWA, and 1 was terminated.

The total value of conversion of contracts converted to grants (ie payments made to Universities to administer PhDs) was \$1,092,850.

The total cost of redundancies across LWA was \$1,072,000.

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Question: LWA 03

Division/Agency: Land & Water Australia

Topic: LWA wind-up

Hansard Page: 50 (19/10/09)

Senator COLBECK asked:

Senator COLBECK—I have some final questions on the overall wrap-up of the organisation. Senator Back has asked you a few questions already. You said at previous estimates that you had 146 projects that were still alive at that point in time. You might have to take this on notice, but could you give us the status of each of those and the total value of those 146?

Dr Robinson—We would have to take the total value on notice and we can update the status according to the current annual operational plan.

Senator COLBECK—That information could give us who was responsible for each of those projects following the winding up of Land and Water?

Dr Robinson—Yes. The annual operational plan for this current financial year describes how each individual project or program will be managed into the future. Though that was basically at 30 June, there are a couple of changes since, as we have worked through each project.

Mr Grant—Dr Robinson agreed to take on notice and provide a list of those projects that were cancelled and terminated. So that will be the start.

Senator COLBECK—I think it is appropriate to get a list of those that have failed or whatever. I would like to know what was lost as part of process. I am not sure how much it is appropriate to put the Land and Water through, given its current level of resources. I think the committee through its questioning has expressed its opinion on what has occurred. If you could take on notice to give us advice on which of those have been curtailed, perhaps that can give us a sense of where it is finalised.

Dr O'Connell—Just to clarify that, you are looking for the 10 projects or whatever it was that were ceased?

Senator COLBECK—However many there were based on the fact that that level of detail is not in the operational plan

Answer:

Please refer to the answer in LWA 01 for a list of projects terminated.

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Question: LWA 04

Division/Agency: Land and Water Australia

Topic: Land and Water Australia

Hansard Page: 52 (19/10/2009)

Senator Nash asked:

Senator NASH—I am having a little trouble reconciling the department's strategic direction, what actually seems to be happening and certainly what the minister is actually doing here. We can look at the strategic direction, which says things like 'ensuring Australia plays a strong role in efforts to tackle global food security' and 'helping our primary industries prepare for climate change, droughts and extreme weather events and boosting productivity by investing in research and development', but the minister in a media release only three days ago was talking about the world population rising to 9.1 billion by 2050 and he said that the only way we can meet what the world will demand is by following every possible path of scientific research. So I cannot reconcile how sacking 30 people and getting rid of an entire research institute complies with what the minister is saying and intending to do. Can somebody perhaps explain that for me? Dr Robinson, have you had—

Senator Sherry—That is the minister's view and I do not think anyone—

Senator NASH—Sorry, Dr Robinson, you are shaking your head.

Senator Sherry—That is the minister's view.

Senator NASH—I just have to say that for the *Hansard* record.

Senator Sherry—That is the minister's view. He has expressed it. It is not the only issue that is taken into account from a whole-of-government point of view, and I will pass your views on and ask if he has anything further to add. We have discussed this matter on a number of occasions at previous estimates.

Senator NASH—I think we have probably discussed it at previous estimates because it is an extremely important issue, Minister, and I would say that that is why it continues to be raised.

Senator Sherry—Fine, and I will pass it on to the minister.

Senator NASH—Lovely. Do you think perhaps we might—

Senator Sherry—But it is not open to public servants to give their view of the minister's comments, and I will pass it on to the minister. If he wants to add to his commentary and observations on this matter, he will. I will pass it on and I will take it on notice for you

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Question: LWA 04 (continued)

Answer:

The 2009-10 Budget posed significant challenges arising from a forecast loss of revenue due to the global financial crisis. The economic environment caused the government to reprioritise its investment in research and development (R&D) with an increased focus on boosting productivity, addressing climate change and global food security.

As natural resource management is now a mainstream issue that will continue to attract both public and private investment, with many other organisations also investing and doing research in this area, the government decided to reallocate its funds from Land & Water Australia (LWA) to other priorities.

Several programs which were overseen by LWA will continue under the management of partner research organisations or other appropriate agencies. LWA's current funding partners will continue to invest in the natural resource management field through existing research organisations such as other research and development corporations, the CSIRO, tertiary institutions and non-government agencies. The government does not believe the closure of LWA will result in LWA's funding partners reducing their investment in sustainable resource management R&D.

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Question: LWA 05

Division/Agency: Land and Water Australia

Topic: LWA wind-up

Hansard Page: 55 (19/10/09)

Senator IAN MACDONALD asked:

Has the TRaCK program reported since we last spoke at estimates? Is there anything new that I have not caught up with?

Dr Robinson—I think there have been some ongoing releases — I could not tell you how many — of scientific reports, but in the last two weeks there has also been a milestone report delivered back to research funders. The Water Commission and the department of the environment are the two main funding agencies now. So they have had milestone reports recently, but there have been ongoing releases, I think, of technical reports, which should be available on the TRaCK website, but we could also—

Senator IAN MACDONALD—So the major reports are publicly available? They are on their web—

Dr Robinson—I would have to check that, but once they are approved—I cannot recall, but yes, they should be.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Sorry?

Dr Robinson—I cannot recall whether they are released publicly, but—

Senator IAN MACDONALD—But they will be, you say?

Dr Robinson—I presume they will be once they are approved through the environment department and the Water Commission.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Are they big reports?

Dr Robinson—Yes. They are largely administrative reports, as well as the technical content.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Could you answer that on notice, or could someone just direct the committee to the website where it will be released.

Dr O'Connell—Certainly

Answer:

The Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts is the new Managing Agent for the Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge (TRaCK) program and provided the following response: TRaCK last reported on 15 October 2009. The project updates, findings and a range of other synthesis products including their newsletter 'On-TRaCK' are publicly available on the TRaCK website at www.track.gov.au.

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Question: LWA 06

Division/Agency: Land & Water Australia

Topic: LWA wind-up

Hansard Page: Written

Senator Colbeck asked:

Dr Robinson said back in May that negotiations would be had with the remaining project partners as to whether or not they would accept the level of funding now available to their project.

1. Did any of these partners choose not to proceed at all?
2. What happens to any funding that was previously allocated to them and which would not be spent based on their decision not to continue?
3. What liabilities does LWA have now?
4. And what liabilities will it leave upon being wound up?
5. How many staff remain at LWA (until its final days in December)?
6. How many of the 41 staff have found jobs elsewhere in DAFF or other agencies since May's Budget Estimates?

Answer:

1. No, of the Programs that had Management Agreements with other partners, all agreed to continue without LWA.
2. N/A
3. All other programs at LWA have been stopped. All projects that were within these programs have been concluded (terminated or curtailed) or novated to other agencies with LWA's funding from the special 2009-10 appropriation.

All service contracts have been or will have been terminated, closed, transferred or surrendered (eg building lease) by December 31.

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Question: LWA 06 (continued)

4. At December 31, there will be no research program or project liabilities and there will be very few other liabilities to be transferred to DAFF (as per the Primary Industries and Energy Research and Development Act). The few liabilities will include any outstanding invoices for miscellaneous items like electricity and phone during the month of December. There will be funds returned to DAFF that cover these liabilities.
5. There will be two staff remaining at LWA during December to complete the wind-up.
6. LWA assisted staff with career planning, financial advice, CV preparation, and interview training was offered.

LWA is not keeping formal records of staff movements following the cessation of their employment.