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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON CLIMATE CHANGE, WATER,
ENVIRONMENT AND THE ARTS

Reference: Climate change and environmental impacts on coastal communities

THURSDAY, 19 MARCH 2009

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE
ON CLIMATE CHANGE, WATER, ENVIRONMENT AND THE ARTS**

Thursday, 19 March 2009

Members: Ms George (*Chair*), Dr Washer (*Deputy Chair*), Mr John Cobb, Mr Dreyfus, Mrs Irwin, Ms Liv-
ermore, Ms Marino, Mr Murphy, Mr Scott, and Mr Zappia

Members in attendance: Ms George, Mrs Irwin, Ms Marino, Mr Murphy, Dr Washer and Mr Zappia.

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

Climate change and environmental impacts on coastal communities. The committee will inquire into and report on issues related to climate change and environmental pressures experienced by Australian coastal areas, particularly in the context of coastal population growth. The inquiry will have particular regard to:

- existing policies and programs related to coastal zone management, taking in the catchment-coast-ocean continuum
- the environmental impacts of coastal population growth and mechanisms to promote sustainable use of coastal resources
- the impact of climate change on coastal areas and strategies to deal with climate change adaptation, particularly in response to projected sea level rise
- mechanisms to promote sustainable coastal communities
- governance and institutional arrangements for the coastal zone.

WITNESSES

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Committee met at 10.53 am

CHAIR (Ms George)—I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, the Environment and the Arts. The committee is inquiring into climate change and environmental impacts on coastal communities. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts and the Minister for Climate Change and Water have asked this committee to examine the environmental impacts of coastal population growth as well as the impact of climate change on coastal areas and strategies to deal with climate change adaptation, particularly in response to projected sea-level rise. The committee will also look at existing policies and programs related to coastal zone management, mechanisms to promote sustainable coastal communities and governance arrangements for the coastal zone.

[10.53 am]

HUNT, Ms Sue, Section Manager, Disaster Preparedness and Recovery Branch, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

LLEWELLYN, Ms Joanne, Section Manager, Disaster Preparedness and Recovery Branch, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

SMITH, Ms Alison, Assistant Secretary, Intergovernmental and Policy Branch, Indigenous Policy Coordination Group, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath I should advise you that hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. In this regard the giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The committee has received your submission and it has been authorised for publication. I would now invite you if you so wish to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to questions and discussion.

Ms Hunt—My colleague Ms Llewellyn and I will briefly talk to our submission and just bring members up to date a little bit with the movable feast that is disaster preparedness and recovery at the moment. Thank you for asking us here today to talk about these matters. FaHCSIA, as you may know, is the lead Commonwealth agency for disaster recovery. We can talk a little bit more about the detail of the arrangements for disaster relief and recovery further into our discussion. But to update the committee in relation to our submission, mention is made in the submission about community resilience and certainly that is an area of great interest to FaHCSIA and indeed whole of government at the moment in relation to disasters. FaHCSIA certainly supports a whole-of-government approach to building community resilience to minimise the social impact of disasters which is the area that we are concerned with.

The Community Resilience Strategy is also mentioned in the submission. It is being considered by government in the context of community resilience, organisational resilience and individual resilience and bringing together all of those elements because we realise it is quite a broad framework that we need to work with across all levels of government and community to capitalise on and build community capacity for disaster resilience.

The other thing I would like to update the committee on is just to reiterate that while FaHCSIA is not in a position to make any statement about the scientific evidence base in relation to climate change and the rising incidence of disasters and changing disasters, we are very concerned with the social impacts of disasters and note that there is general agreement amongst experts that disasters are increasing in their severity and changing in their nature. Of course, the Victorian bushfires is a stark point of fact there. In relation to the evidence we would like to draw the committee's attention to something that might be of interest to you. We have a transcript here. It was a program recently on the SBS *Insight* program on 2 March in which a senior climate change scientist was interviewed. He talked about the elements that have contributed to the increasing incidence of bushfires in reference particularly to the severity of the

Victorian bushfires. While there are a number of different elements including heat, lack of humidity and winds and a combination of elements that come together to create the conditions that cause the increasing preponderance of bushfires, what he did agree on was that climate change is definitely the factor that is impacting on the temperature. In that way I suppose we can infer that there is a link there between climate change and bushfires, by association.

Ms Llewellyn—Also cyclones, I guess, as well.

Ms Hunt—Yes. We have that transcript if you are interested at all in that.

Mrs IRWIN—Perhaps we might ask the parliamentary library for the actual video of the show for all members.

Ms Llewellyn—I think you can also watch it on the SBS website as well and download the transcript. It is worth watching.

Ms Hunt—I think that is quite interesting. I note that the committee has indicated they are very interested in a number of other matters in relation to the disaster, relief and recovery arrangements. I might hand over to my colleague Joanne Llewellyn who can give a little bit more detail about the tapestry of arrangements that exist for supporting disaster relief and recovery in Australia.

Ms Llewellyn—The Australian government's role is to assist Australians to recover from the social and community impacts of disasters across all hazards. We do that through our Australian government disaster recovery arrangements which we are currently revising at the moment. We do have a draft copy that we could provide to the committee. An important aspect of the whole Australian emergency arrangements or management arrangement context is that the constitutional responsibility for protection of life and property still rests with the state and territory governments. The Australian government's role is one of responding to onshore disasters and to complement the responses of the state government. In terms of the Victorian bushfires and the widespread flooding in Queensland, our role is to complement that state's capacity to respond to the disaster in that state. The government also assists when the impacts of the disaster might exceed the state and territory capacity to respond. I guess that happened with Victoria because of the magnitude of that impact and the devastation of loss of life and property.

With the Australian government disaster recovery arrangements, the two key or established disaster recovery programs are their natural disaster relief and recovery arrangements that are administered by the Attorney-General's Department and the Australian government disaster recovery payment that the minister for FaHCSIA approves. That is provided to individuals. In terms of the Victorian bushfires we have expended over \$45 million in making that recovery payment to individuals that have been affected by the bushfires. Our role in FaHCSIA is as the lead agency in recovery but we are not responsible for the whole of the Australian government emergency management arrangements. That is the Attorney-General's Department. There are Australian emergency management arrangements that you may be able to find on the Attorney-General's website that were just updated in October, November last year. They set the parameters for a whole-of government response to disasters and how that is coordinated across state government levels.

There are also the model arrangements for leadership during emergencies of national consequence and that is under the PM&C portfolio. We could probably provide a copy to the committee but I would just note that is a PM&C responsibility. They represent how Australian governments would work together to coordinate the response to and recovery from emergencies of national significance to provide some clarity about how Australian governments would work together to coordinate a national response. That is what we would adhere to and they were endorsed by COAG last year.

In terms of our arrangements we have handed out the principles that we adhere to, the disaster recovery principles. That is particularly relevant to Indigenous and coastal communities, too, because the whole focus of disaster recovery is the community-led approaches from the ground up ensuring that coordination is across all levels, ensuring effective communication and acknowledging and building that capacity. We do not just want communities to be able to bounce back to where they were before but to be able to bounce back and be in a better position to withstand disasters if they happen again or to be better prepared for disasters. That is a broad overview of the Australia government disaster recovery arrangements.

CHAIR—Would you like to say a few words about Indigenous communities or are you happy just to—

Ms Smith—Yes, I am happy to just take any questions. I do not have anything in particular to add to the submissions.

CHAIR—Thank you for your opening statements. On behalf of the committee I would like to say thank you to Ms Hunt and to all of the staff that have been working so diligently and with great compassion over the bushfire situation in Victoria. It has been a shocking tragedy but I think the response of the Australian government, which relies very much on the hard work of people like yourselves, should be noted on the record and we would like you to pass on our thanks to the people in your division for a wonderful response.

We have had before us earlier Emergency Management Australia which is, as you said, in the Attorney-General's Department. What is the level of interface between that body and the kind of work you do? It seems from what you were saying that you handle mainly the personal end, the payments, and they do the kind of macro response?

Ms Hunt—I might just expand on that. We do have a very close working relationship with Emergency Management Australia. The disaster specific area in FaHCSIA, the branch that Ms Llewellyn and I belong to, is quite small. It does not actually really have a hands-on approach in disaster recover response at the coalface but, as Ms Llewellyn pointed out, we do coordinate and develop recovery policy and we convene the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Committee, which is the Commonwealth government mechanism for coordinating our disaster recovery response, so there are all Australian government agencies and I think some major non-government agencies are represented on that as well.

Ms Llewellyn—We have a not-for-profit advisory group that we seek advice from.

Ms Hunt—I suppose it is really important to note that we are just a very small kind of cog in the wheel and there is a whole range of people, levels of government and community

organisations that are working out there to do disaster recovery and relief. But as to your question about our role, as I said we develop recovery policy and we manage and activate a range of payments of financial and non-financial assistance, including the Australian government disaster recovery payment and disaster recovery packages. Emergency Management Australia are more focused I suppose on immediate assistance to states and territories because under the constitution states and territories have the primary responsibility for recovery in their jurisdictions. There is a plan that EMA has, the COMDISPLAN, which is the Commonwealth Disaster Plan. They manage that and they respond and provide assistance to states and territories on request in the event of a major disaster.

Ms Llewellyn—There is a recent example of that with the oil spill up in South-East Queensland. COMDISPLAN was activated and the Australian government is providing assistance in locating the oil containers.

Ms Hunt—In a way I suppose you could summarise it and say that FaHCSIA concerns itself with the broader social impacts of disasters and the effects they would have on individuals and communities. For example, if people lose their homes, their homes are flooded, their ability to earn an income is affected or they might lose a family member, all those sorts of issues where people are impacted. Of course we certainly cross over with disaster recovery but EMA focus much more on recovery and restoration of infrastructure within disaster affected communities.

Under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery arrangements which Ms Llewellyn has alluded to, EMA manage those. That is an arrangement for sharing responsibility with states and territories providing assistance for those sorts of restorative activities. They work very much with communities also in the area of preparedness and risk assessment and mitigation to disasters and they provide a national training and education service as well in Victoria for emergency management and disaster recovery professionals. But we do work in very closely with them.

CHAIR—You mentioned that you have some input in terms of policy directions. Is there much discussion going on at your level in regard to amending existing policy to take into account climate change impacts and particularly sea-level rise and what this might mean for vulnerable communities? Could you just outline the level of that discussion?

Ms Llewellyn—I think particularly with the Attorney-General's Department looking at the impact of climate change is a key focus for them at the moment as to their whole-of-government disaster response.

Ms Hunt—The key thing for us is that with increasing disasters that might be associated with climate change there will be accompanying social impacts and they are the sorts of things that we are focusing on at that human recovery part of the continuum. All of our programs look more at ameliorating those impacts perhaps more than looking at the actual risks and the causes.

Ms Llewellyn—Also, from a strategic policy broad overview of FaHCSIA we would be examining the impact of climate change on our client groups on low incomes.

CHAIR—I wanted to ask Ms Smith about that.

Ms Hunt—Our vulnerable groups.

Ms Llewellyn—The department does engage with other agencies such as the Department of Climate Change to ensure that FaHCSIA's interests are represented and low income households are represented. That will be reflected in external policy development, so that is a coordination across government departments.

CHAIR—In relation to climate change impacts on Indigenous communities, we were a bit disappointed that when we were in Darwin we were not able for one reason or another to have a submission from the Northern Land Council. We have since extended the opportunity and still do not have one. Of course, no report that we prepare will be sufficient if it does not include impacts on Indigenous communities. In that regard we are very thankful for the attachment you have given us about the Indigenous communities located approximately 10 kilometres from the coastline. Could you inform the committee as to what policy developments are occurring in relation to this particular group of people that will have profound impacts?

Ms Smith—We do a great deal to make sure that Indigenous people are not forgotten in the policy making process, even when it is not our primary responsibility. It is about climate change. We are working with DEWHA on thinking carefully about the impact particularly for those remote communities but for Indigenous people who are very often overrepresented in those low income groups and trying to think about engaging with health for example on the extenuating health impacts of higher climates, poorer water, access to poorer water resources and those kinds of things. We have also worked with our state government colleagues, particularly through the COAG process last year, on making sure that our collective forward planning processes, particularly around the agenda of closing the gap, does take account of the changing environment and including climate change. It is primarily a state and territory responsibility as to how houses are adaptable to climate change and how communities are adapted; nevertheless we work pretty closely with our state and territory colleagues, particularly the Northern Territory government.

CHAIR—Do you have any input into the Department of Climate Change considerations about these issues? You mentioned the environment department. What about the climate change department?

Ms Smith—Yes. In fact somebody from our branch has gone to a—I am sorry I do not have the exact details. I can provide them to you. Climate change and environment and water are running some information sessions with Indigenous people and a lot of Indigenous peak groups. They are running a workshop today in fact on the impact of climate change. I am sorry, I cannot remember the name of it but I am thinking about the carbon recovery program—

Ms Llewellyn—Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme.

Ms Smith—Yes, thank you, it is on the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme and its possible impacts and ways in which Indigenous communities might be able to get involved.

CHAIR—I am advised that the Minister for Climate Change recently announced funding for a study to assess how climate change will impact on Indigenous communities in Northern Australia. Is your department or branch involved in any way in this study?

Ms Smith—We are not involved now but we will be. We are usually seen as an area that—

CHAIR—The main coordinating agencies involved with climate change seek your input on a range of factors?

Ms Smith—Yes, that is right. Yes, it does and it would come to us about that.

CHAIR—We are having them back before the committee. I think we are missing the knowledge that we need to have to make sure that the report does pick up on vulnerable Indigenous communities.

Ms Smith—If there is any way I could help with that, yes. I can find some details—

CHAIR—Everything you come across that you think would be useful—

Ms Smith—I am conscious of the fact that we make reference in our submission to a National Emergency Management Strategy for remote communities. That is to go to the Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. They have not met again since we made this submission so they have not actually seen that report, but if I can provide that to you then I will.

CHAIR—That would be very useful. Obviously, we will be meeting with the Department of Health.

Ms Smith—We work pretty closely with them, too.

Mrs IRWIN—When we were talking about the coastal Indigenous communities that you liaise with the Northern Territory government on, do you actually go out into these communities and advise them how to virtually prepare for a disaster, or do you just leave that for the states and territories to do that?

Ms Llewellyn—There is a remote Indigenous communities advisory committee that is also under the Attorney-General's Department, so they might be questions you want to put to the Attorney-General's Department. Ms Smith already mentioned the National Emergency Management Strategy for remote communities—for Indigenous communities—is called Keeping Our Mob Safe. FaHCSIA did provide a list of mainstream programs that had the potential to strengthen their capacity to respond to disasters and that is something we could probably table with the committee as well, looking at not just FaHCSIA but DEEWR and other departments' programs that might assist the Indigenous communities and build their capacity. We provided that to RICAC for them to table at their last meeting. I do not know if RICAC has an ongoing role or whether it was just a time limited committee but you might want to speak to Attorney-General's. Were they going to be attending the hearing?

Mrs IRWIN—I am not quite sure. I think they are.

CHAIR—We had the disaster emergency management people.

Dr WASHER—I would like to emphasise the disappointment on the Northern Land Council. If we were not on tape I would tell you more frankly what I thought about them. However, I am interested in the comments from your department because I believe you are working with the Department of Environment, Water and Heritage and the Arts for these Indigenous rangers. We first really heard about this when we were looking at the Great Barrier Reef. They had Indigenous rangers as part of the project there and it seemed to be working out very well. We met one of those rangers. In fact, could you comment as to the fact that there is apparently \$90 million over five years funding and there are going to be roughly 300 employed that I guess are going to be mainly rangers. How effective is that so far? How is that progressing?

Ms Smith—I cannot tell you very much about the program because it is not run out of our area. I was involved early on with work with the Northern Territory government to try to put rangers on a surer footing, if I could put it that way. You would all be aware I am sure that many communities, including councils like the Northern Land Council, have often had ranger programs but they have had to fund them out of different sources. I seem to remember that at one point they had about 30 different funding sources. We tried to put them on a surer funding basis because of the multitude of benefits that come from the ranger program. Not only is it of benefit to the environment but it seems to be extremely beneficial for the community and for the individuals who are involved in the program. It provides a really good form of employment for people because it is mixed in and draws on all they know about taking care of country, which has been a really strong element of the program. But I would be pleased to find some more information out for you.

Dr WASHER—It sounds great but I would have thought it is a very big positive for Indigenous communities, particularly as it seems to have worked in the Pacific and other areas, too, where people get in from an environmental point of view but actually improve the whole community in terms of women's rights and health and a whole range of things. It really has a big ongoing benefit if we exploited it carefully. That would be great.

Ms Smith—I am happy to provide you with some more information.

Ms Hunt—I thought it might be worthwhile mentioning as well that our evidence base in relation to social impacts and community resilience is developing and that is an area that FaHCSIA is quite interested in developing up and making stronger. We are about to embark on some research in relation to the impact of disasters on Indigenous communities and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. That might start to give us some more information about that.

CHAIR—In that regard it was interesting at a conference that we went to and talked to Dr Gurrin from Sydney University. I would point you in the direction of her research work. She has done some work for the National Sea Change Taskforce and talks about the impact of climate change on vulnerable socioeconomic groups, but particularly low-income earners. Then when we visited the central coast there was an incident there where there was flooding occurring on the surrounds of the lake and of course all the people living around the lake were often people in relocatable homes and in caravan park scenarios, very poor people. I think in time to come there will be a very high correlation between the varying impacts of climate change on communities like that. Also, it would be of assistance if you are able to speak to someone in your department

to try yet again to try to get a submission from the Northern Land Council on behalf of these communities. If that is possible—

Ms Smith—I will follow that up.

CHAIR—As I say, I do not think the report is going to be complete unless we do look at that top end and what it means. We have been to Kakadu and we appreciate that Kakadu is one of those iconic places where increasing salt water intrusion is going to have a marked impact on the ecosystems there. We had a really good submission from the Torres Strait Authority. They were able to manage to get a quality submission to the committee.

Ms Smith—They have been thinking a lot about this issue.

CHAIR—Would you please take that on notice?

Ms Smith—Did you get a submission from the Northern Territory government?

CHAIR—That is still pending.

Ms Smith—It just may incorporate some issues. Okay.

CHAIR—No, it is still pending. We must chase that up, too.

Mr MURPHY—Have you done any disaster recovery planning with the Torres Strait Islanders?

Ms Llewellyn—No, not specifically. That again would be the state government's responsibility. Our role over the top is to try and provide some direction and leadership in community capacity building.

Mrs IRWIN—I have no further matters. The submission was very good and I think we have covered a lot of the questions that we wanted to ask today.

Ms Smith—I just spoke to some colleagues of mine before I came. I understand that housing is not an issue that you particularly want to talk about with us today but I did just want to mention to you in terms of working with state governments to think about adaptability into the future. One of the things that is built into the agreement that we have with the Northern Territory government around what is called the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure program which is funding housing in the Northern Territory is the provision of a design library which the alliance partners as they are called who are going to be building all of these houses are to use and they are to provide additional innovation and share amongst one another, particularly around better adaptation to the climate with regard to more use of solar power and trying as much as possible to use natural cooling methods for housing. It is trying to make a change to the quality of housing and its adaptation to the climate, if you like, in the Northern Territory. If I can provide you some more information about that—

CHAIR—That would be great. That would be terrific.

Ms Smith—That is I guess part of that longer term engagement we have.

CHAIR—We are looking at a whole range of adaptation strategies and anything on housing on the coastal zone and standards that should apply to construction would be really useful. I will leave it to you to take on notice my desire to yet again try to seek advice from the Northern Land Council about issues that are of concern to their community. If there is any assistance the department can provide that would be greatly appreciated.

Ms Llewellyn—Just picking up on what was said before, we are still doing the research. We are working with Attorney-General's who are looking at developing that natural hazard map to identify locationally disadvantaged areas. We would also be looking into it with them when identifying the social vulnerabilities in those areas and what we can do to build their preparedness for disaster. That is something that is on our agenda.

Ms Hunt—It is very much about trying to leverage off mainstream programs and get them to build in thinking about how to prepare and become more savvy to disasters.

Ms Llewellyn—We should also recognise the inherent resilience in some of these communities already.

CHAIR—Absolutely. You have an enormous challenge ahead of you over the next period of time in Victoria. Full marks to all of you and please pass on the views of our committee to the people who are working with you.

Dr WASHER—You mentioned that states have the responsibility under the constitution for disaster management. Can I just point out that there are some problems? I was in Kununurra not so long ago, which is at the top of WA but very close to Darwin. When they have any kind of emergency in that part of WA they have to transport those people who are sick or injured as a result of a disaster to Perth. Perth is a long way from Kununurra. Darwin is very close. But Darwin hospital will not take those people because it is in a different jurisdiction. Quite frankly, it is insane. These state boundaries are geographically not appropriate for disasters. When we say the states are going to handle it, they cannot even handle minor problems let alone major problems, so there is a real flaw. Could you just remember that? Certainly the people of Kununurra would like to tell you how crazy it is that they cannot even in the most dire of emergency situations move people to Darwin, an hour's flight away, instead of taking them to Perth which is about a four and a half hours' flight away, if you can get a plane out of there.

Ms Llewellyn—Perhaps then they would come to the Commonwealth and ask for assistance. I think that is where the Attorney-General's would come in and try to coordinate that. The Commonwealth might not be able to deliver on the response but they might find someone who can help in another agency or to task another agency to do that under the NDRRA as well, the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements, which is a reimbursement arrangement with each state government and they can make something happen.

Ms Hunt—Without speaking out of turn about another department, I have knowledge about the Department of Health and Ageing's health emergency response arrangements and they certainly have a well established committee structure where they work with chief health officers

across all states and territories, so there is a capacity or capability there to coordinate when there might be those jurisdictional barriers that pop up.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for attending the hearing today and for your submission. The secretariat will send you a copy of the transcript for any corrections that need to be made and we would also be grateful if you could forward back to the secretariat any additional material that you have taken on notice today and any other advice that might inform our report and recommendations.

I declare the public hearing closed. On behalf of the committee I formally welcome Mr Murphy as a member of our committee to replace Mrs D'Ath.

Resolved (on motion by **Dr Washer**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 11.27 am