

Chapter 1

Introduction

Referral of the inquiry

1.1 On 25 March 2014, the Senate referred the following matter to the Environment and Communications References Committee (the committee) for inquiry and report by 25 June 2014:

The adequacy of the Australian and Queensland Governments' efforts to stop the rapid decline of the Great Barrier Reef, including but not limited to:

- (a) management of the impacts of industrialisation of the reef coastline, including dredging, offshore dumping, and industrial shipping, in particular, but not limited to, current and proposed development in the following regions or locations:
 - (i) Gladstone Harbour and Curtis Island,
 - (ii) Abbot Point,
 - (iii) Fitzroy Delta, and
 - (iv) Cape Melville and Bathurst Bay;
- (b) management of the impacts of agricultural runoff;
- (c) management of non-agricultural activities within reef catchments impacting on the reef, including legacy mines, current mining activities and practices, residential and tourism developments, and industrial operations including Yabulu;
- (d) ensuring the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has the independence, resourcing and capacity to act in the best interest of the long-term health of the reef;
- (e) the adequacy, timeliness and transparency of independent scientific work undertaken to support government decisions impacting the reef;
- (f) whether government decision processes impacting the reef are consistent with the precautionary principle;
- (g) whether the Strategic Assessments currently underway are likely to protect the reef from further decline;
- (h) the identification and protection of off-limits areas on the reef coastline to help protect the health of the reef;
- (i) consistency of efforts with the World Heritage Committee's recommendations on what is required to protect the reef;
- (j) the extent to which government decisions impacting the reef, including development of the Strategic Assessments and Reef 2050 Plan, involve genuine, open and transparent consultation with the Australian

community, affected industries and relevant scientific experts, and genuine consideration of the broader community's views in final decisions; and

(k) any other related matters.¹

1.2 The reporting date was subsequently extended to 27 August 2014.² It was then extended again to 3 September 2014.³

Conduct of the inquiry

1.3 The committee advertised the inquiry on its website and in *The Australian* newspaper. The committee also wrote to relevant organisations and individuals inviting submissions by 2 June 2014. The committee received 64 submissions, which were published on the committee's website and are listed at Appendix 1.

1.4 The committee held public hearings relating to its inquiry in Brisbane on 21 July 2014, Mackay on 22 July 2014, and Townsville on 23 July 2014. A list of witnesses who appeared at the hearings may be found at Appendix 2.

1.5 The committee notes that there were some comments in the media⁴ from a member of the House of Representatives about whether this Senate inquiry was being conducted in a balanced manner, and in particular, whether North Queensland Bulk Ports Corporation was given the opportunity to 'defend themselves' during this inquiry. The committee notes that it wrote to the North Queensland Bulk Ports Corporation (along with numerous other industry groups), inviting it to make a submission to the inquiry. North Queensland Bulk Ports Corporation did eventually make a submission responding to evidence received during the inquiry.⁵ Ports North, who did make a submission, were invited to come to the hearing in Townsville but declined, noting that they would be represented at the inquiry through their industry bodies, Queensland Ports Association and Ports Australia, in Brisbane on 21 July 2014.

Acknowledgement

1.6 The committee would like to thank all the organisations, individuals and government departments that contributed to the inquiry.

1 *Journals of the Senate*, No. 24, 25 March 2014, p. 709.

2 *Journals of the Senate*, No. 28, 14 May 2014, p. 793.

3 *Journals of the Senate*, No. 47, 27 August 2014, p. 1313.

4 See, for example, 'Christensen labels Senate inquiry a 'kangaroo court'', *The Whitsunday Times*, 24 July 2014, <http://www.whitsundaytimes.com.au/news/christensen-labels-senate-inquiry-a-kangaroo-court/2327364/> (accessed 8 August 2014); 'MP slams reef hearing as a 'waste of time'', *Daily Mercury*, 23 July 2013, <http://www.dailymercury.com.au/news/mp-slams-reef-hearing-as-a-waste-of-time/2326772/>, (accessed 8 August 2014).

5 North Queensland Bulk Ports Corporation, *Submission 62*.

Notes on references

1.7 Hansard references in this report are to the proof committee Hansard. Page numbers may vary between the proof and the official Hansard transcript.

Structure of the report

1.8 This chapter outlines the conduct of the inquiry. Chapter 2 provides an introduction and background in relation to the Great Barrier Reef, in particular the legal and policy framework relating to the reef, primarily at the Commonwealth level. It also examines the World Heritage Committee's concerns about the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, as well as some of the relevant reviews, reports, plans and strategies relating to the Great Barrier Reef.

1.9 Chapter 2 sets out background information relating to the management of the Great Barrier Reef, including a summary of the legal framework at the Commonwealth level. It also examines the World Heritage Committee deliberations and outlines some of the relevant recent policies, reports, plans and strategies.

1.10 Chapter 3 provides an overview of the scientific evidence on the health of the Great Barrier Reef, including evidence that the Great Barrier Reef is in decline and the reasons behind this decline; as well as the importance of scientific work underpinning decision-making, including incorporation of the precautionary principle.

1.11 Chapter 4 examines catchment management and the quality of water entering the Great Barrier Reef from the catchment areas. The chapter examines the issues relating to broad scale run-off and those related to specific, more localised, activities. The chapter also examines the use of no-go zones in the catchments and within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

1.12 Chapter 5 considers issues relating to the management of the impacts of port developments, including dredging and disposal of dredge spoils, in the Great Barrier Reef Region. Chapter 6 examines particular issues in relation to the development of the Port of Abbot Point and the Port of Gladstone. Chapter 7 outlines issues relating to the management of shipping.

1.13 Chapter 8 looks at governance, management and funding arrangements relating to the Great Barrier Reef, including the role, resourcing and independence of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, as well as cooperation and coordination between governments, along with role of the Strategic Assessments and proposed long-term sustainability plan.

1.14 Chapter 9 draws together the committee's conclusions and recommendations in relation to the management of the Great Barrier Reef.

1.15 In terms of the four regions identified in the inquiry's term of reference (a), Fitzroy Delta and Cape Melville/Bathurst Bay are considered in Chapter 5. Gladstone Harbour/Curtis Island and Abbot Point are outlined in further detail in Chapter 6.

1.16 The committee notes that term of reference (i), relating to the efforts to respond to the World Heritage Committee's recommendations, is considered where relevant in each chapter.

1.17 Finally, the committee notes that it received very little evidence on the issue of fishing.⁶ As such the committee does not examine this issue in any detail in this report. The committee notes, however, that there is a comprehensive discussion of the impacts of, and issues in relation to, fishing in section 5.4 of the *Outlook Report 2014*.

6 The most notable exception is the submission from Carefish (*Submission 16*).