



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Proof Committee Hansard

SENATE

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS LEGISLATION
COMMITTEE

Estimates

(Public)

THURSDAY, 21 NOVEMBER 2024

CANBERRA

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ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

Thursday, 21 November 2024

Members in attendance: Senators Bilyk, Darmanin, Duniam, Grogan and Whish-Wilson

CLIMATE CHANGE, ENERGY, THE ENVIRONMENT AND WATER PORTFOLIO

In Attendance

Senator McCarthy, Minister for Indigenous Australians

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Ms Rachel Parry, Deputy Secretary

Ms Katrina Maguire, Division Head, International Environment, Reef and Ocean Division

Mr John Foster, Branch Head, Great Barrier Reef Branch

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Mr Joshua Thomas, Chief Executive Officer [by video link]

Mr Fred Nucifora Acting General Manager Strategic Policy and Partnerships [by video link]

Dr Roger Beeden, Chief Scientist, Strategic Policy and Partnerships [by video link]

Mrs Jameelie Fletchett, Chief Operating Officer, Corporate Services [by video link]

Mr Richard Quincey, General Manager, Marine Park Operations [by video link]

Committee met at 11:35

CHAIR (Senator Grogan): I declare open this hearing of the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee into the 2024-25 supplementary budget estimates. I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.

The committee has fixed Thursday 9 January 2025 as the date for return of answers to questions taken on notice. The committee's proceedings today will begin with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. Understanding order 26, the committee must take all evidence in public session, and this includes answers to questions on notice. I remind all witnesses that in giving evidence to the committee they are protected by parliamentary privilege. It is unlawful for anyone to threaten or disadvantage a witness on account of evidence given to a committee, and such an action may be treated by the Senate as a contempt. It is also a contempt to give false or misleading evidence.

The Senate has endorsed the following test of relevance for questions at estimates hearings. Any questions going to the operations or financial positions of the departments and agencies which are seeking funds in estimates are relevant questions for the purpose of estimates hearings. I remind officers that the Senate has resolved that there are no areas in connection with the expenditure of public funds where any person has a discretion to withhold details or explanations from the parliament or its committees unless the parliament has expressly provided otherwise.

The Senate has resolved also that an officer of a department of the Commonwealth should not be asked opinions on matters of policy and should be given reasonable opportunity to refer questions asked of the officer to superior officers or to a minister. The resolution does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policies or factual questions about when and how policies were adopted. Witnesses are reminded of the Senate order specifying the process by which a claim of public interest immunity should be raised. I incorporate the public immunity statement into the *Hansard*.

The extract read as follows—

Public interest immunity claims

That the Senate—

(a) notes that ministers and officers have continued to refuse to provide information to Senate committees without properly raising claims of public interest immunity as required by past resolutions of the Senate;

(b) reaffirms the principles of past resolutions of the Senate by this order, to provide ministers and officers with guidance as to the proper process for raising public interest immunity claims and to consolidate those past resolutions of the Senate;

(c) orders that the following operate as an order of continuing effect:

(1) If:

(a) a Senate committee, or a senator in the course of proceedings of a committee, requests information or a document from a Commonwealth department or agency; and

(b) an officer of the department or agency to whom the request is directed believes that it may not be in the public interest to disclose the information or document to the committee, the officer shall state to the committee the ground on which the officer believes that it may not be in the public interest to disclose the information or document to the committee, and specify the harm to the public interest that could result from the disclosure of the information or document.

(2) If, after receiving the officer's statement under paragraph (1), the committee or the senator requests the officer to refer the question of the disclosure of the information or document to a responsible minister, the officer shall refer that question to the minister.

(3) If a minister, on a reference by an officer under paragraph (2), concludes that it would not be in the public interest to disclose the information or document to the committee, the minister shall provide to the committee a statement of the ground for that conclusion, specifying the harm to the public interest that could result from the disclosure of the information or document.

(4) A minister, in a statement under paragraph (3), shall indicate whether the harm to the public interest that could result from the disclosure of the information or document to the committee could result only from the publication of the information or document by the committee, or could result, equally or in part, from the disclosure of the information or document to the committee as in camera evidence.

(5) If, after considering a statement by a minister provided under paragraph (3), the committee concludes that the statement does not sufficiently justify the withholding of the information or document from the committee, the committee shall report the matter to the Senate.

(6) A decision by a committee not to report a matter to the Senate under paragraph (5) does not prevent a senator from raising the matter in the Senate in accordance with other procedures of the Senate.

(7) A statement that information or a document is not published, or is confidential, or consists of advice to, or internal deliberations of, government, in the absence of specification of the harm to the public interest that could result from the disclosure of the information or document, is not a statement that meets the requirements of paragraph (1) or (4).

(8) If a minister concludes that a statement under paragraph (3) should more appropriately be made by the head of an agency, by reason of the independence of that agency from ministerial direction or control, the minister shall inform the committee of that conclusion and the reason for that conclusion, and shall refer the matter to the head of the agency, who shall then be required to provide a statement in accordance with paragraph (3).

(d) requires the Procedure Committee to review the operation of this order and report to the Senate by 20 August 2009.

(13 May 2009 J.1941)

(Extract, Senate Standing Orders)

CHAIR: I remind all senators that as we continue our work implementing the *Set the standard* report, as chair, I will ensure that proceedings are conducted in an orderly, respectful and courteous way.

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

[11:37]

CHAIR: I would now like to welcome Senator the Hon. Malarndirri McCarthy, Minister for Indigenous Australians, representing the Minister for Environment and Water. Minister, would you like to make an opening statement?

Senator McCarthy: No, I'm fine, in the interest of time.

CHAIR: I will also welcome the departmental officers who are with us, and just note that we are having some technical difficulties with joining the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority onto the video conference, but as senators do have questions relating to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority for the department, and given we have a hard deadline of 12.30, we'll start with those questions while people make the IT work.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: On 27 August, the day that the reef outlook report was tabled, I note that Minister Plibersek, the Prime Minister, and the government's reef envoy, Senator Nita Green, held a press conference in Townsville to announce more reef funding. Following this funding, there appeared to be a number of what we call 'ghost accounts' on social media promoting the announcement that day, and these are identical messages across a number of different accounts. I've got a couple of examples here, where they say: 'Australia's commitment to the Great Barrier Reef is inspiring. Protecting such a vital ecosystem shows we can make a big difference one project at a time.' These appeared across a number of different accounts. Is there a formal communication strategy where funding is being allocated to promote messaging around the Great Barrier Reef, that the department is aware of?

Ms Parry: Formal communication strategy—and I'll turn to Mr Foster, who heads up the Great Barrier Reef Branch. We have a number of communication activities. In terms of the departmental communication channels, anything that would be coming out from the department is all branded by DCCEEW, similarly with the reef authority. Those are authorised channels. It certainly wouldn't involve us purchasing any third-party social media accounts, but Mr Foster might be able to run through anything more specific.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Would the same apply to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority? They would be bound by the same—

Ms Parry: They would be bound by the same.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Mr Foster, do you have anything to add?

Mr Foster: As Ms Parry mentioned, all of our communications go out through branded websites or branded social media posts. We don't use third parties for any of our communication.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Minister, is it possible that the minister's office or the Prime Minister's office is spending money to promote messaging across third parties on social media?

Senator McCarthy: I can take that question on notice for you.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Anything you can let me know on that would be good. Obviously, interestingly, the day that the Prime Minister, Senator Green and the minister stood together to announce this funding was the same day that the reef outlook report was tabled in parliament. It wasn't mentioned at the press conference. Was the minister aware that the report was going to be tabled that day? Given how significant that reef outlook report was, did the department have any correspondence with the minister around the tabling date?

Ms Parry: I might take that on notice unless the officials know the answer to that. I actually think the reef authority would be dealing directly with the minister on the tabling of the outlook report. Given it is an independent report, they would be briefing the minister. I don't believe we brief on top of that.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: If you could take that on notice anyway—

Ms Parry: I'll take it on notice in case there was any extraneous briefing, but I don't anticipate so.

**Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water
Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority**

[11:41]

CHAIR: I'll just interrupt. Senator Whish-Wilson, we do now have the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority with us by videoconference, and I'd like to welcome Mr Joshua Thomas, the chief executive officer. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Thomas: No, I'm very happy to continue with questions.

CHAIR: Thank you so much. Senator Whish-Wilson, we'll go back to you.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Perhaps I could put that to you, Mr Thomas, or anyone from GBRMPA. Was the minister aware that the report was being tabled that day?

Mr Thomas: I could only assume that she was. Our obligations as an agency are to provide that report to the minister by 30 June each year, and we certainly did that. The minister then took a period of time to consider that report and tabled it within the required 15 sitting days.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: I might come back to that in a second. Was there any preferred tabling date that GBRMPA or the department had in relation to that report, or was the 27th just the choice of the minister?

Mr Thomas: There would have been discussions. We would have been aware of their intended timing to publish that report so we could support with relevant collateral materials—media releases et cetera.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: You mentioned there that on 30 June the minister was provided with a copy of the report. Just remind me again—what was the date that the draft UNESCO decision was made in relation to the World Heritage in Danger listing?

Mr Thomas: I don't have that information in front of me. I know that the World Heritage Committee did meet sometime in July this year, but I'm not sure of the exact date of publication of that draft decision. I'm sorry. Affirmation of the draft decision, I should say.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: My understanding is that the affirmation of the draft decision was announced as being made on 25 June. Can you remember what exact date you sent the minister a copy of the outlook report?

Mr Thomas: Yes, it was provided on 28 June this year.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Correct me if I'm wrong in terms of the process. The draft decision was made by UNESCO to leave the reef off the World Heritage in Danger list. Then, three days later, she received a copy of the outlook report, which was 634 pages long and presumably had taken a long time to pull together, given it looks at a five-year outlook. Do you know what date the World Heritage Committee accepted the draft recommendation to leave the reef off the World Heritage in Danger list?

Ms Parry: I have to go back and take that question on notice. I should be able to get that while we are still here because we have the dates we were in New Delhi when that item was being discussed. It did get gabbled

through as part of a block of items as the agenda moved through. It's not a fixed agenda item, so I just can't remember exactly which day it was gabbled through.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Correct me if I'm wrong then, please, in terms of coming back to us on that, but my understanding is that it was 25 July. That's nearly a month after the minister had her copy of the report. Was a copy of the report provided by the minister's office or the department to UNESCO prior to that final decision?

Ms Parry: The outlook report?

Senator WHISH-WILSON: The outlook report.

Ms Parry: No, I don't believe so, but we did brief UNESCO ahead of and during our appearance as new information was coming to light on bleaching results. Mr Thomas would be able to answer the question of whether or not they were specifically briefed on the outlook report.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Mr Thomas, could you answer that question on whether UNESCO had received a copy similar to the minister prior to making their final decision?

Mr Thomas: I will need to check whether the report was provided in draft. I don't believe it was. But certainly the report was conveyed to UNESCO, at least upon publication. I know it was transmitted; I just need to check exactly when.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: On publication?

Mr Thomas: I believe so, but I would like to check that.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Could you check the date? Because my understanding is that it was on 28 August, more than a month after their decision. You can see this was obviously a very important report. It got extensively covered, even though the minister didn't talk about it at her press conference the morning it was released. Here we have this piece of work that GBRMPA, the department and many people had worked on in conjunction with AIMS that talks about the dire outlook for the reef in a future of climate, which seems to be playing out with the early AIMS results from just the latest summer. I don't understand why UNESCO wasn't given a copy of this, given they were making such an important decision around a World Heritage in Danger listing and here's the most comprehensive document in five years about the health of the reef.

Ms Parry: I have two things to add to that. One, Mr Thomas can talk about the legislative requirements around the tabling of the report and the timing of the tabling of the report. That's a requirement that the Reef Authority has to follow.

I'll make a broader point, though. We are in constant contact with UNESCO and its advisers. We provided a progress report that outlined all of the activities that UNESCO had asked us to do. We provided follow-up briefings between the submission of the progress report and our appearance at the World Heritage Committee. There were active discussions between the UNESCO ambassador as well as a delegation who was briefing UNESCO at that time.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: I'm sure that's all correct.

Ms Parry: The line of communication and the volume of reports and information are all completely transparent.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: I'm sure. To be honest, having seen some of the information put out by some of our DFAT representatives in different places, especially countries that are on the UNESCO committee, I wouldn't necessarily trust that the information they're getting is not politicised. I'm not saying that is about your department.

Ms Parry: Senator, we have reams of information that is publicly available by our scientific agencies, by our reef authority, by scientific consensus statements that the ambassador draws upon.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Ms Parry, if that's the case, why not give them a copy of this report?

Ms Parry: Because it's a legislative requirement that it needs to be tabled first.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Why wasn't it tabled earlier?

Ms Parry: It's a legislative requirement, but perhaps Mr Thomas can answer that question.

Mr Thomas: I can only offer that the minister has 15 sitting days within receipt of that report to table it, and that's what the minister has done.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: So it's the minister's decision? Yes. Is that correct?

Mr Thomas: The timeframe to table the report, yes. Once we submit it to the minister—naturally, as you noted, it's a large document—we provide some briefing around the document on what the requirements are and speak to the minister's office about their preferences for the timing.

Ms Parry: UNESCO receives volumes of materials when it makes its decisions in preparing for its committee meeting in July of every year. That's why they ask for the progress report of 1 February. They review files and provide their advice to World Heritage Committee members well in advance of the meeting. At that time, the outlook report would have still been in the preparation stage regardless. That's why we brief them verbally as well, continuing to go into the committee meeting to ensure that the committee members have the most up-to-date information.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: I don't trust what you're briefing them on, I'm sorry.

Ms Parry: Briefing materials are always publicly available.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Given the government's agenda has always been to prevent a World Heritage danger listing, I'm guessing that they're being briefed that it's all fine.

Ms Parry: Again, we point them towards materials that are publicly available on the Australian Institute of Marine Science website on the results coming out from the reef authority themselves. All that material is available.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Hopefully I'll get another chance to continue questioning on this.

Senator DUNIAM: Can I go to the rebuild of the Reef HQ. I wonder if there's an update available.

Mr Thomas: There is. I think you'd probably be aware there's been an additional \$100 million committed to the redevelopment of that aquarium. We are currently shaping up our plans and pathways by which we'll deliver on a new national education centre for the Great Barrier Reef.

Senator DUNIAM: So we're in the planning phase at the moment; is that broadly where we're at, given the additional funding?

Mr Thomas: That's correct. We had originally, several years ago, looked at it as a significant refurbishment, and some funding was provided for those refurbishments to address some critical issues—work health and safety issues, and challenges facing the living coral reef exhibit. We've attended to those quickly, but as we pulled in further experts and engineers, and had all the necessary reports done, the project took on a much greater level of complexity. We've been speaking to government about that. We have a new funding envelope and we are working within that funding envelope to shape up what the aquarium looks like.

Senator DUNIAM: So there was the reallocation of the funding out of the city deal. When did the government advise that that was where the funding would come from for the rebuild?

Mr Thomas: I'd need to come back to you on the exact dates about the advice around that \$100 million.

Senator DUNIAM: If you want to take that on notice, that's fine—on what date you were advised by government that that's where the funding would be coming from. And any further information on discussions around alternative funding sources to secure what was required would be helpful as well, please.

Just in terms of determining the cost, the money you're now able to utilise: were there different project scope options provided to the government for what was ultimately decided? Were a range of options provided?

Mr Thomas: Yes. We have been speaking to government about all the many different ways we could skin the cat for the aquarium, ranging from refurbishment through to knockdown rebuilds. We've been speaking to government about that now over the past couple of years, and scoping what the total cost envelopes would be for each. We're very satisfied that the funding provided now will allow us to build a great aquarium.

Senator DUNIAM: How many other options were available, or put forward?

Mr Thomas: We're talking about a range of options with government at a range of different scales through all the normal budget processes of government. Some of those are still being finalised. The exact timing for when the money will be provided to us is still being finalised. I don't think it would be entirely appropriate for me to reflect on all of that in detail here.

Senator DUNIAM: If a decision hasn't been made I understand that, but in terms of options that have been presented I was just after a number as opposed to the specific detail. There was an initial \$80 million, was there not, for this work; is that correct?

Mr Thomas: There was. Funding came through in a series of different tranches over a couple of years initially that took that envelope up to \$80 million for the refurbishment.

Senator DUNIAM: How much of that has actually been expended?

Mr Thomas: Approximately \$21 million has been spent to date on a range of different activities. I am happy to run through some of those.

Senator DUNIAM: Yes, if you could. What is that range of different activities?

Mr Thomas: We were upgrading animal life support systems, including water filtration; critical safety items, including the main switchboard so that the plant runs the facility; structural walls; wet and dry fire systems; engineering assessments; and project staff around all of those activities. Then there's other funding spent on business strategy development including customer profiling research, engineering assessments, advisory services, traditional owner co-design work, and relocation and agistment of animals and corals; we want to look after the living exhibit.

Senator DUNIAM: On notice, if you could provide me with a list of those, plus the cost associated with each of those that you've referenced, that would be helpful. And the balance of the \$80 million—21 out of 80 leaves 59—what happens to that?

Mr Thomas: That's all capital funding. That will be rolled together with the \$100 million that's been committed recently. The total available funding from here for the facility is approximately \$161 million.

Senator DUNIAM: Do we have a budget within the \$161 million related to the design, specifically—as opposed to construction—for the new rebuild project? Have you got an element of the budget related to design only?

Mr Thomas: Not just yet. We need to go out to market and test the market to get a sense of what those reasonable costs would be. Suffice to say, we really do want to make sure we capture all the value of the investment put into the aquarium to date. We're looking at ways we can use design work done to date into the future.

Senator DUNIAM: Okay, understood. In terms of timeframes, when do you expect demolition work to start on the site?

Mr Thomas: I think that will depend on how we go through our procurement processes. We need to go out to market, get on board principal contractors, allow them to scope options and work out what's best in that regard. I wouldn't want to hazard a guess.

Senator DUNIAM: Yes. If I'm conducting house renovations, I'd love them done by Christmas, for example, so we all go in with a hope. Does the authority or government have a hope—without being flippant about it—of when you intend to commence work and then, finally, reopen?

Mr Thomas: On the work front, I think it's important to acknowledge that there actually is a lot of work going on right now. The building is still standing—the tanks are still there; the water's still there—but we have been agisting corals and aquatic life out to AIMS. A huge amount of detailed planning work, as I mentioned, has gone into the facility and its future. Regarding demolition, precisely—it is hard for me to speculate. I think it would be within the next 18 months or so. Again, I really want to stress that's caveated by procurement processes.

Senator DUNIAM: Understood. I'm not going to come back here in 18 months time and say, 'You said'—I understand that these things blow out, traditionally. Beyond that, roughly, when do we hope to have a finished product that Australians and others can access?

Mr Thomas: That will really depend entirely on the scope of the design—how big it is, how ambitious it is and how much of the existing facility can be kept in place. I would hope that within the next four to five years, conservatively, we would have a new and shiny aquarium for the people of Townsville to visit.

Senator DUNIAM: That's all I needed to know—a rough estimate. As I said, I can guarantee I'm not going to come back here and hold you to those rough estimates, conservative or otherwise. I will just go to a couple of other matters relating to AusTender. It indicated that, as part of contract number CN4102579, the authority is currently in the midst of spending \$25,000 on a short recruitment process. This is for an SES band 1 position, as far as I'm advised. I've got the contract notice for you here. Is that the ballpark of what we normally spend on recruitment for an SES 1?

Mr Thomas: I believe so. We have a panel of providers. We assess value for money in engaging those providers to do that work. There's considerable work involved in those processes. I believe that's for a general manager SES band 1 position that's out to market at the moment and for which interviews are already underway.

Senator DUNIAM: The final question—and then I'm done for today—is just relating to another tender. It is in relation to \$59,610 spent on accommodation for a conference at the end of April for the WOW TUMRA conference. Does that ring any bells?

Ms Parry: Not for me, but is that a Reef Authority tender?

Senator DUNIAM: I think it's an authority question.

Ms Parry: Okay. Sorry, I thought you were looking at me.

Senator DUNIAM: No. Sorry, when I look over the top of my glasses and try to look serious, I could be looking anywhere. Yes, I wonder if there's a change of personnel there.

Mr Thomas: We will come back to you on that question. Mr Richard Quincey may have more details.

Mr Quincey: That was a week-long conference with women traditional owners of, predominantly, our traditional-use marine resource agreement areas that was held in Cairns, and there were some on-country components. It was attended by a range of our authority staff but mostly other stakeholders. It was really bringing together representation from across our traditional owner groups on the Great Barrier Reef for a component that we think has been underrepresented over time, and it was a very, very successful outcome to help build a network of women traditional owners in the sea country management space.

Senator DUNIAM: This was a limited tender. Can you explain to me how a limited tender works, in very brief terms—noting that I don't have much time.

Mr Quincey: It was not that we put it out to open market. We went to, I think—I'd have to check the details—three possible providers in the Cairns-Port Douglas area for accommodation and catering. We sought quotes from those three providers and picked the most appropriate quote.

Senator DUNIAM: How many attendees were there at this conference—

Mr Quincey: I would have to take it on notice.

Senator DUNIAM: Yes, if you would take it on notice—my question was going to be: how many attendees were covered by the \$59,000 cost? These were traditional owner representatives, did you say? Is that correct?

Mr Quincey: Yes.

Senator DUNIAM: They were, obviously, not employees of the authority.

Mr Quincey: Some employees were there to help facilitate work with the group, but it was predominantly traditional owners of the Great Barrier Reef.

Senator DUNIAM: How many were employees and how many were external stakeholders?

Mr Quincey: I would have to take that on notice.

Senator DUNIAM: If you could. What was the duration of the conference?

Mr Quincey: I believe it was a week—I think, a Monday to Friday. I'll check that detail as well.

Senator DUNIAM: Yes, on notice. And could you just indicate in perhaps a paragraph what was covered for each of the attendees, not by name but in broad terms—accommodation, transport, food and beverage et cetera for any events that occurred. If you could do that on notice, that would be great. That's me done.

CHAIR: Senator Whish-Wilson?

Senator WHISH-WILSON: I had a quick question in relation to expenditure. It's a follow-up from question on notice SQ 24-000539 in relation to, Mr Thomas, your expenditure on visit to Saudi Arabia and Paris. Both were trips of around six days; I think that was the information provided. The Saudi Arabian trip was at a cost of \$18,656 for six days, whereas the Paris World Heritage Committee vote trip was \$10,500 for the same period of time. I was just wondering why there was a big discrepancy there in expenditure between the two trips—\$8,049.

Mr Thomas: I can only say that our practices in booking these types of trips are all evaluated on a value-for-money basis, and the best-fare-of-the-day policy applies. I would need to come back to you on notice if I can actually find out why those cost discrepancies were what they were.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Just to be clear, the cost discrepancy was \$10,500 between the two trips. If you could do that, that would be great.

Mr Thomas: It may not have all been due to flights. It may have been to do with accommodation. Saudi Arabia's not the cheapest place in the world to visit—downtown Riyadh. So it might have been about accommodation. I'm not sure of the exact cost split, but we'll come back to you with what we can.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Thank you. I don't have many questions left here, and I have to go back into the chamber, so I'll be quick. In relation to what we were just discussing about the outlook report, you mentioned there's a statutory requirement of 15 working days before it can be tabled in the parliament. Was that correct?

Mr Thomas: That's correct. From the time it's received, the minister has 15 days to table the report.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Until it's tabled in parliament, it wouldn't be able to be provided to someone like UNESCO? Is that correct? Am I reading that into it?

Mr Thomas: I'm speculating a little bit here. I think that would probably be at the minister's discretion, but she has obligations, I imagine, to the parliament, and it's important to respect the parliament, the report being tabled there first before being made public to the wider world.

Senator McCarthy: I would find it absolutely unusual for any minister to deliver a report that they have to table to the parliament, outside the parliament first.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Yeah, okay. Was that what you were going to add, Ms Maguire?

Ms Maguire: No, I was just going to clarify: you said 15 working days; it's 15 sitting days, just to be clear.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Are you sure about that? I've just checked.

Mr Thomas: In the act, it does say '15 sitting days'.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: It was tabled on 23 August and given to the minister at the beginning of June. There weren't 15 sitting days in between those dates. It can't be 15 sitting days.

Ms Maguire: It has to be within 15 sitting days.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Within 15. Gotcha. Sorry about that. That solves that problem. That's all I needed to know. I was trying to work out how the 15 days worked with that date of 23 August. Did you want to add something, Mr Thomas?

Mr Thomas: I would only add that previous editions had been tabled on 30 August, 12 August and 2 September. So, it's certainly been published within those legislative timeframes previously. The dates all vary based on sitting days, minister's availability, and so on. If the minister had wanted to, within 15 working days, they could have tabled it and it could have still been provided to UNESCO well in advance of their final vote. That's the conclusion that I can draw from this.

Ms Maguire: Sorry, within 15 sitting days?

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Within 15 sitting days, yes. That includes that week that we came back to parliament in August. It could have been provided that week, which was more than a week before the UNESCO decision.

Ms Maguire: But noting Senator McCarthy's point about how it is unusual for the minister to provide something public before presenting to parliament.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: That's right, but she could have still presented it to parliament well and truly within 10 days of the UNESCO final decision, and then it could have been made available to UNESCO or made public. Anyway, that's my reading of it.

Senator McCarthy: Can I take that question on notice? Obviously I haven't got the diary of the calendar in front of me, but we can have a look at those 15 sitting days and get back to you.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Yes. Obviously, it is within 15 sitting days if it's on 23 August, when it was tabled in parliament, but my understanding is that it could have been tabled on, for example, Friday 19 July—we had a sitting week that week—or any day that week, based on what I've been told.

Senator McCarthy: It was still quite a lot of pages, though. We gave them at a five-year outlook report.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Sure. But I'm flabbergasted that it wasn't given to UNESCO, in terms of the importance of the document and what it says about the outlook of the reef, given they're making a decision about whether the future of the reef and its outstanding universal values are in danger from climate change. That report could have been material to their decision.

Ms Parry: I can only note the volume of material that we do provide to UNESCO—the volume of publicly available material, including the reef snapshot that was publicly available well ahead of the UNESCO decision. We report regularly to UNESCO. They commend us on the transparency of our reporting and the availability of materials.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: You've already said that, Ms Parry, and I've noted that. That's on the *Hansard*. I'm making a point here that this is a substantial report—

Ms Parry: And we will be reflecting that in our progress report next year.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: which had a very dire outlook on the reef and looked at five years of data, and I would have thought it would have been a very substantial report to give to UNESCO. Anyway, it sounds like it

was outside of your hands, Ms Parry. Were there any discussions between your department or GBRMPA and the minister's office in relation to whether this report should be given to UNESCO?

Ms Parry: We just honour the legislative requirements that the minister—

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Did you have any discussions about whether this report should be provided to UNESCO, with the minister's office or between GBRMPA and the minister's office?

Ms Parry: Not that I recall, because we were looking at the timeframes of when UNESCO—

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Could you take that on notice?

Ms Parry: I'm happy to take that on notice—

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Yes, because I'll put in an FOI request or an OPD if I need to.

Ms Parry: but again I note the timeframes of when the report would be tabled vis-a-vis the sitting of the World Heritage Committee and the requirements of the World Heritage Committee itself, which stipulates that all our submissions needed to be by 1 February 2024. They require that; that's their deadline. The information we provided as a supplement to that was off our own back; it wasn't a question that UNESCO had requested.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: But you could have provided this as a supplement too.

Ms Parry: It had not been tabled yet.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: I'm saying you could have tabled it and provided it.

Ms Parry: We couldn't provide a report that (a) wasn't there and (b) wasn't tabled.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Ms Parry, I've established you could have tabled it and provided it by the time of their final decision, but it didn't happen.

Ms Parry: Again, I can only go back to the volume of information we do provide them and what was required of us, which was a progress report. That was what formed the basis of UNESCO's decision.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: In terms of the optics of this, while Senator Duniam was asking questions, I've just found out that the minister had to sign off on its tabling, so she was aware it was being tabled on 23 August. She completely buried it; she didn't even mention, at her press conference when she was on the Barrier Reef, that this critical report had been released. I do wonder why that is the case. That's me being a politician there, but it seems to me there's a big push to say positive news about the reef. I understand we need to give people hope, but we also need to be realistic.

I have some questions about the AIMS survey. Mr Thomas, AIMS will release some preliminary information on the reef surveys this week. Do you have any idea when this final survey will be completed?

Mr Thomas: I might ask Dr Beeden to reflect on that one.

Dr Beeden: Thanks for the question. This is one of the three sector survey reports that AIMS produce through to the final annual report that they will probably publish in or around August next year. That's when we will have the most complete picture of the consequences of the summer that has just gone.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Okay. What was the date you expect it to be finished, then?

Dr Beeden: The combined surveys across all 11 sectors will be reported on in the next annual report, which is due probably around July or August next year.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: They said they were 15 to 20 per cent complete and had looked at the northern sections of the reef. Is there any reason why they released this information early? Was it just because it's a matter of public interest, or is that normal?

Dr Beeden: That would probably be a question for the Australian Institute of Marine Science, but they do provide this information every time they come back in from the reef, so they provide it periodically and provide the data through to their data systems, which people can then query.

Senator WHISH-WILSON: Unfortunately, I have to go; otherwise I'm going to get into trouble.

CHAIR: We are no longer quorate due to quite a lot of bells ringing downstairs. I would like to thank you so much for joining us this morning from sunny Queensland, and thank you to the department. We will conclude today's hearing there. Thank you to Hansard and Broadcasting. Written questions on notice will be lodged with the secretariat by 28 November, and, as flagged by Senator Whish-Wilson, there will be questions coming your way.

Committee adjourned at 12:13