



# **Inquiry into Australian Antarctic Division Funding**

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

7 September 2023

Dear Committee,

As the primary union representing Australian Public Service employees including workers at the Australian Antarctic Division (AAD), the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is committed to providing a strong voice for our members. The CPSU welcomes the opportunity to make this submission regarding the management of funding for the AAD and the major impact this will have on staffing and science projects in the AAD.

This submission relies on information provided by CPSU members in the AAD, responding to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

Our submission addresses:

- A history of underinvestment in the AAD
- The need for clarity regarding the proposed budget cuts
- The impact of the proposed cuts on the AAD's workforce
- The capacity of the AAD to undertake critical science projects as a result of the proposed cuts
- The impact of funding cuts on Australia's international standing and strategic interests and the role of Antarctica in Australia's national security

## A history of underinvestment in the Australian Antarctic Division

Australia's investment in Antarctica is essential for our environmental, economic and strategic interests, though this has not always been reflected in funding and resources allocated to the AAD. The proposed funding cuts to the AAD will occur at a critical time for addressing human-induced climate change following almost a decade of budget cuts, efficiency dividends and arbitrary staffing caps that have already come at a cost to science.<sup>1</sup>

*"These cuts need to be seen in the context of many years of underinvestment in Antarctic matters by successive governments."<sup>2</sup>*

*"The situation has been created by the previous government, both due to the staffing cap, over-use of contractors, expensive consultants and outsourcing, and creation of a top-down command-and-control culture, where wasteful spending cannot be questioned by front-line workers."<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

CPSU members report extremely low levels of morale within the AAD. There are serious cultural issues within the ADD, including lack of trust in current systems, discrimination, bullying and harassment and ‘an alarming number’ of employees reporting experiencing mental and physical harm because of workplace stress<sup>4</sup>. The most recent APS census results painted a picture of AAD employees who are purpose-driven and committed to public service but increasingly disillusioned with how things are run. None of this is helped by the perception that the essential work they perform is not valued; *“these budget cuts are in some cases the ‘last straw’ for staff who’ve been overworked and under-resourced for the last decade”*<sup>5</sup>.

### *The need for transparency*

The CPSU has welcomed the considerable and much-needed investment in the AAD in the past few years. The 2019 commitment of \$450 million over 10 years to upgrade Antarctic research stations and supporting infrastructure was an unprecedented level of investment in the Australian Antarctic Program<sup>6</sup>. In 2022, the Government committed \$804.4 million over 10 years<sup>7</sup> via the Sustainable Funding Review, which was explicitly identified as an “additional investment<sup>8</sup>” to the AAD’s core budget. This investment was allocated to key scientific programs and employment of new staff to strengthen Australia’s strategic and scientific capabilities in the region<sup>9</sup>, directly supporting local jobs and procurement.

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<sup>4</sup> Russell, L. (2023) ‘An independent Review of Workplace Culture and Change at the AAD’, p.10, Accessed: <<https://www.dcceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/independent-review-of-workplace-culture-change-at-aad.pdf>>

<sup>5</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Antarctic Program (2019) ‘New funding for upgrades of Antarctic research stations’, Accessed via: <https://www.antarctica.gov.au/news/2019/new-funding-for-renewal-of-antarctic-research-stations/>

<sup>7</sup> Australian Antarctic Program (2022) ‘\$800 million to strengthen Australia’s leadership in Antarctic’, Accessed via: <https://www.antarctica.gov.au/news/2022/major-funding-announcement/>

<sup>8</sup> Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet (2022), ‘Press Conference Triabunna, TAS’, Accessed via: <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-43814>

<sup>9</sup> Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet (2022) ‘\$800 million to strengthen our leadership in Antarctica’, Accessed via: <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-43813>

Considering these commitments, the current budget shortfall was unforeseen by AAD employees and there is a widely held sense of confusion as to how this occurred. AAD staff are concerned that there is a lack of accountability and transparency regarding AAD spending, particularly in relation to the 2022 funding announcement that was understood to be an additional investment. Staff are perplexed by previous explanations of the ‘additional’ \$804.4 million changing to ‘repackaged previous money’ and budget cuts being pinned on terminating the *RSV Nuyina* budget. The 2022-23 Parliamentary Budget Statements also show an increase in funding over the forward estimates. Members are seeking clarification of these issues so that a repeat of this situation can be avoided.

*“It’s unclear why these cuts are necessary...why there wasn’t more notice that this budget reduction was coming. We want to understand how we got into this position, so this isn’t repeated in the future<sup>10</sup>.”*

In meeting with the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water (the Department), the CPSU was advised that funding is being redirected from all operational divisions to cover corporate functions and IT shortfalls. While it is anticipated that this would lead to a slowing of the growth trajectory in other line areas, with jobs and programs unaffected, the AAD is an outlier in that the proposed cuts will directly impact staffing levels and the AAD’s capacity to undertake vital projects, programs and research activities. The financial impact is so severe that a ‘business as usual’ season is not possible this Summer within the constrained budget. This has led to many planned (and long delayed by Covid-19) science projects being scrapped.

The CPSU urges the Department to undo its decision to make arbitrary cuts to each operational division that will disproportionately impact the AAD and will significantly harm the capability of the AAD to carry out its duties- to the detriment of Australia’s environmental, economic, security and geopolitical interests.

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<sup>10</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

## Serious implications for the AAD's workforce

While the Department has stated that there will be no direct job losses, the AAD will review existing fixed-term employment contracts and not fill roles that become vacant as part of reprioritising spending<sup>11</sup>. The CPSU understands that 70 non-ongoing employees will not have their contracts renewed because of the impending cuts and that future recruitment would be highly 'cautious.' For example in essential areas such as biosecurity and cargo, many employees are engaged on short-term contracts that are regularly renewed; the future for these staff and their work is now uncertain. The AAD *"has a heavy reliance on contractors (doing ongoing work) in crucial areas"*<sup>12</sup>.

In addition to this, many ongoing positions are stalled at different stages of recruitment due to budget constraints. There was a much-needed upsurge in recruitment following the 2022 funding announcement- some positions were filled just before the budget problems were announced, but AAD employees advise that more than 40 scientific positions at an advanced stage of recruitment have now been put on hold indefinitely. The arbitrary nature of this and the apparent role of 'luck' in deciding which positions were filled in time, brings into question the AAD's budget process, and at what point management became aware of the division's financial problems. AAD employees advise that this is not just affecting new jobs, but existing jobs are often not filled when positions become vacant and this attrition is already impacting AAD operations.

*"All of the planned recruitments into science branch under the \$804 million Antarctic funding package have been stopped and there is not much hope that they will be reinstated. Whole work areas identified in the funding package seem like they will not go ahead. The process of identifying these science branch*

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<sup>11</sup> Gibson, A. (2023), 'Antarctic research at risk because of funding issues', Accessed via: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-07/antarctic-research-at-risk-because-of-funding-issues/102677940>

<sup>12</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

*positions was well considered in terms of Australia's needs and our various strategic plans. It feels like the care taken in this process has been at great cost.<sup>13</sup>*

*"It is not true that no jobs are being lost. Important contributions to the science program are made by people on contracts that are largely not being extended. Recruitment of new scientists under the Strategic Funding Review was quite advanced when funding was withdrawn for ALL new science positions. It is becoming harder to recommend the AAD as a workplace<sup>14</sup>."*

There appears to be an assumption that there is capacity among ongoing employees to absorb the work performed by the contractor workforce, however CPSU members advise that it would be near impossible to incorporate the work of these employees into the existing work of ongoing staff due to their current workloads: ongoing staff will *"be left to take on this work and end up working excessive hours in areas they're possibly not trained for<sup>15</sup>."*

Under-resourcing at the AAD has led to single-person-dependency in some areas, excessive hours of work, increased stress, loss of experienced workers, and an environment where people's jobs are at risk. This raises concerns for continued safe operations at the AAD. Working safely requires workers who will speak-up when they see problems – without fear for their jobs. The APS Census results for the AAD show that the perceived trend for safety at the division is very concerning.

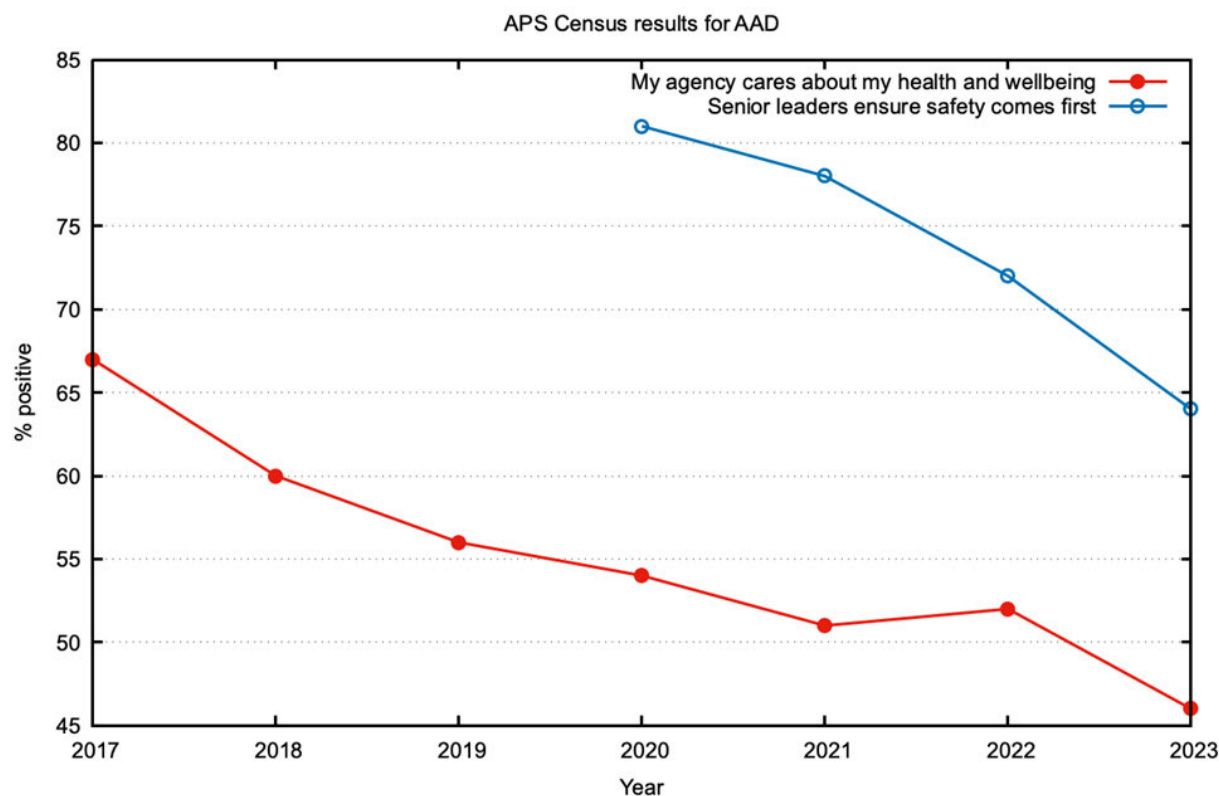
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<sup>13</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

Table 1: AAD APS Census results<sup>16</sup>



It would be remiss not to acknowledge the local impact of the loss of these jobs in Tasmania. The Government has a role to play in ensuring secure, quality jobs in regional areas.

### *The AAD's reliance on insecure work*

As of February 2023, 245 of 537 workers were non-ongoing (including 23 of 60 science staff), with an additional 55 labour hire/contractors<sup>17</sup>. This reliance on insecure work is a side-effect of the previous Government's arbitrary ASL cap and erodes the institutional knowledge and capability of the AAD.

It takes time to develop and nurture the means to run a successful scientific program, notwithstanding the time it takes to deliver it; it is essential to ensure the AAD invests in specialist,

<sup>16</sup> Collated AAD APS census results from 2017-2023

<sup>17</sup> DCCEEW, 'AAD People Dashboard 28 February 2023'.

appropriately-trained researchers and technical experts to build a long-term Australian Antarctic Program<sup>18</sup>.

Concern about the loss of knowledge and expertise due to insecure work was a common theme when seeking members views on the proposed cuts:

*The AAD “has already lost so much of its corporate knowledge which was one of the key strategic assets it had. Now we will be losing another generation of policy experts and applied scientists who will not have the chance to learn how to operate in Antarctica and the key decision-making forums of the Antarctic Treaty.”<sup>19</sup>*

*“These cuts are destroying the next generation of Australian scientists.”<sup>20</sup>*

*“Early career research scientists require a pathway and funding to do their work and develop their niche skills. Being unemployed (often this type of work is contract based by design) can completely derail their career and break the pipeline that Australia needs as they are forced to enter other industries for employment.”<sup>21</sup>*

*“Specialised Antarctic field science feels impossible and jobs in the field are rare. Our ability to nurture new scientists and provide Australian jobs has been absent for a decade and has been taken away from us again.”<sup>22</sup>*

*“Expeditioners pay is already subpar compared to industry standards for all trades groups. I believe that budget cuts will be detrimental to retaining experienced Expeditioners.”<sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> CPSU member, 2023.



*“Being effective in Antarctic affairs takes many years to develop and does come at huge opportunity cost to those involved- there really is no other employer in Australia for many of the skills and experience held at the AAD, and losing that through short term funding cuts will take many years to rebuild.”<sup>24</sup>*

Fostering the development of young scientists is key to building the capability of the AAD. While the CPSU welcome’s the AAD’s proposal to reduce expenditure on contractors these positions should be made permanent, ongoing roles to provide stability for Antarctic science and attract and retain the skilled employees needed to conduct this critically important work.

***The CPSU recommends:***

- The Department review the planned redistribution of funding to ensure adequate staffing levels and a focus on secure, ongoing positions, including:
  - Adequate funding to complete the recruitment process for the 40 scientific positions identified in the Sustainable Funding Review
  - A guarantee that staff on short-term contracts will have their positions fairly assessed and re-hired as ongoing staff where their work is essential

## Cuts to science at a critical point in history

The proposed budget cuts will be disastrous for Antarctic research and will have a substantial impact on the AAD’s ability to deliver scientific outcomes and maintain Antarctic and subantarctic operations. Cuts to science this season will have flow-on effects, impacting ongoing seasons,

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<sup>24</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

planning and research teams: *“We can’t just cut things in one year and restore them in the next. We need long-term sustainable funding.”<sup>25</sup>*

When asked about the impact to science and delivering on projects, members said the following:

*“The funding cuts are dreadful for science and compound a long-standing under-investment.”<sup>26</sup>*

*“The scientific attributes of the projects that were cancelled was not a key factor in the decision-making process. Necessarily, it was about dollars and where they would come from, but this is not consistent with Science being at the centre of what the AAD does.”<sup>27</sup>*

*“Science, which is supposed to be our primary purpose, is the first to go because the expenditure it requires (equipment, allowances, cost of supporting collaborators, non-operational ship time) is ‘discretionary’<sup>28</sup>.*

This is a critical time for Antarctic science; Antarctic sea-ice is at a record low, and research is essential to our understanding of climate change. Rising temperatures and variability in weather patterns such as the El Niño are wreaking havoc on natural systems both here and in the Antarctic and these drastic cuts to scientific programs will seriously impact the scientific communities’ ability to understand and measure environmental impacts<sup>29</sup>. The Southern Ocean and Antarctica are critical to the Earth system and a failure to collect data *“will increase uncertainty in the science that will have real world implications and costs”*, such as poor weather and climate forecasts, inappropriate mitigation strategies and impacting coastal risk planning from sea level forecasts.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

It is important not just to focus on the implications for climate science but also the conservation and environmental management science that *“Australia and AAD science was a leader in, and no one else can or will do...no-one will or should make sure that the oil spills and pollution around Australian stations is cleaned up, or that our fisheries are sustainably management. That work is Australia’s responsibility and needs to be sustained as a priority.”*<sup>31</sup>

Workers are also concerned about the serious operational effects these budget issues will have on the Australian Antarctic Program. It leaves the AAD completely reliant on a single ship, *RSV Nuyina*, that is yet to complete a full Antarctic season and is still undergoing commissioning.

*“Currently there is no priority of funding in the organisation to use the most expensive asset in the organisation’s history, the RSV Nuyina’s, underway science instrumentation in a sustained and operational manner during logistics voyages.”*<sup>32</sup>

*“The Nuyina has not been delivered as fully operational...only 9 days out of a planned 120 for science equipment commissioning have occurred, no ice breaking trials, etc. Ships cost money to run and new ships are notorious for having issues that take longer than people plan, and considerably more money that they set aside, to get commissioned, and to run.”*<sup>33</sup>

The CPSU is extremely concerned about the many work health and safety risks associated with funding insecurity, particularly the potential ramifications of having a single ship in operation, as this means there is no back-up for staff safety not to mention maintaining operations. This poses a serious Work Health and Safety risk that must be addressed urgently.

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<sup>31</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

Insufficient funding will exacerbate existing work health and safety risks. It will place additional pressure on expeditioner recruitment and workloads across the Division. It is also likely to further delay the implementation of risk controls for identified mental and physical safety concerns in high-risk workplaces in Antarctica and Macquarie Island.

Finally, AAD staff also tell us that adequate long-term, ongoing funding certainty is essential for critical scientific operations. This includes setting aside appropriate contingency funds should they be required. The current funding uncertainty must be rectified.

*“These budget cuts come on top of years of under-funding of crucial support services (operational areas that support science projects for example). It’s important to note that although a lot of money has been spent at the AAD in recent years, this hasn’t gone to these vital support services.”<sup>34</sup>*

***The CPSU recommends:***

- The Department review the planned redistribution of funding to ensure certainty for scientific research and safety for workers, including setting aside adequate contingency funds should alternative shipping or logistics to maintain the stations be required

## The consequences of funding cuts to Australia’s Antarctic program for Australia’s international standing and strategic interests

It is imperative to acknowledge the strategic importance of the work carried out by the AAD in Antarctica. Of this, members said the following:

*“Short term funding cuts will cripple Australia’s ability to regain its leadership and influence in Antarctic matters.”<sup>35</sup>*

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<sup>34</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

*“At a time of massive and increasing climate change, any cuts will damage the nation’s reputation and should be embarrassing to the Australian public.”<sup>36</sup>*

*“Australia risks its status as a quality partner in science research in Antarctica. Cancelled voyages and the overwork of AAD scientists degrade our ability to contribute to and engage in international research programs”<sup>37</sup>.*

*“Science underpins the treaty, our reputation and our obligations and claim to the AAT”<sup>38</sup>.*

*“Science is said to be the currency of the Antarctic Treaty. Cutbacks in this area diminish our national interest and make us look weak in comparison to other treaty nations.”<sup>39</sup>*

Funding uncertainty is adversely affecting Australia and the Australian Antarctic Program’s reputation and relationships with other research organisations.

It is important to also consider the important place that Antarctica holds for Australia’s national security. Ensuring that the region ‘remains free from military competition is essential to Australia and New Zealand’s national security’, with other nations eager to expand their military activities<sup>40</sup>.

It is essential that Australia maintains a strong presence in the region to reduce security risks and continues to lead the way in Antarctic research that is highly valued by the international community.

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<sup>36</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>39</sup> CPSU member, 2023.

<sup>40</sup>The Cove (2022) ‘Know Your Region: Antarctica- Military’, Accessed via: <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/kyr-antarctica-military#:~:text=Antarctica%20has%20an%20important%20place>

## Conclusion

The Department's planned funding redistribution disproportionately impacts the AAD, in turn risking a number of critical science projects for Antarctica as well as the loss of quality jobs in Tasmania.

AAD employees are deeply committed to, and passionate about, the work that they do in Antarctic science and research, wildlife conservation and in advancing Australia's strategic interests in the Antarctic region<sup>41</sup>. The proposed redistribution of funding must be rectified to ensure that critical science performed in the AAD will not be negatively impacted.

Failure to reverse the proposed cuts would be, as stated by one AAD worker, "*a shameful waste of human endeavour*."<sup>42</sup>

### ***In summary, the CPSU recommends:***

- The Department review the planned redistribution of funding to ensure adequate staffing levels and a focus on secure, ongoing positions, including:
  - Adequate funding to complete the recruitment process for the 40 scientific positions identified in the Sustainable Funding Review
  - A guarantee that staff on short-term contracts will have their positions fairly assessed and re-hired as ongoing staff where their work is essential
- The Department review the planned redistribution of funding to ensure certainty for scientific research and safety for workers, including setting aside adequate contingency funds should alternative shipping or logistics to maintain the stations be required
- That all of this be done in direct consultation with AAD employees and their union

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<sup>41</sup> Russell, L. (2023) '*An independent Review of Workplace Culture and Change at the AAD*', p.10, Accessed: <<https://www.dcceew.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/independent-review-of-workplace-culture-change-at-aad.pdf>>

<sup>42</sup> CPSU member, 2023

If you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact Katie Higgins, Policy and Research Officer, via email at

Yours sincerely,

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CPSU Deputy Secretary