



**Community and Public Sector Union
(PSU Group) Submission:**

Australia's Antarctic Territory

August 2017

As the major union representing employees in Australian Antarctic Division (AAD), based in Hobart, and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is committed to providing a strong voice for members in key public policy and political debates. The CPSU welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry on Australia's Antarctic Territory.

The CPSU has previously made submissions to parliamentary inquiries about such matters as the inquiry into Australia's future activities and responsibilities in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters. At that time, the CPSU warned that the Budget cuts to the CSIRO and the AAD were short-sighted and would do lasting harm. These cuts have undermined both Australia's strong track record of research in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic, and our international standing.

The CPSU's submission is informed by our members and delegates. Our submission focuses on the impact of cuts on the scientific program into the future, outsourcing of funding and research as well as concerns about the increased role of Defence and the broader impact on our national interest.

There have been significant cuts to staffing levels

The AAD is still reeling from significant staffing reductions over three voluntary redundancy rounds in recent years. Between 2013 and 2015, there were 44 voluntary redundancies from the AAD, 20 of which came from the Science branch. Management have acknowledged in AAD consultative forums that staffing numbers are down, the science and data centre areas were disproportionately hit by the voluntary redundancies and that people are stretched.

Prior to the commencement of staffing cuts, staff numbers at the AAD was an Average Staffing Level (ASL) of 415 in 2012-13¹. The most recent Portfolio Budget Statements indicate an ASL of 383 in 2016-17 with a projected further decline to an ASL of 378 in 2017-18,² a decline of 9% over five years. A reduction in staffing levels of this magnitude constrains the ability of the AAD to perform all of its functions. Many comments from members highlighted how under resourced the AAD is.

"The [Australian Antarctic] Division is exhausted. I've been here for 30 years and I didn't think it could get worse, but it's worse this year."

"We are down to two large programs, down from four, so managers are supervising twice as much."

"We can't do any more with what we've got."

"I had to tell my manager at my last annual review that I couldn't continue to work this hard."

¹ Portfolio Budget Statements 2013-14 Budget Related Paper No. 1.17 Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population And Communities Portfolio

² Portfolio Budget Statements 2017-18 Budget Related Paper No. 1.7: Environment and Energy Portfolio

"We are just fighting fires all the time"

The staff cuts have meant significant increased workloads for the remaining staff. Many members commented on the impact on their work.

"The last few years have seen the loss of lots of key staff, and we haven't seen a replacement, and their workload has gone onto others – not just in volume, but also in level (working well above their APS level on a regular basis). While this provides some opportunities, it's not right on a long-term basis to exploit staff in that way."

"Key functionality has been lost in the last 5 years. For example our web content hasn't been updated, HR has reduced from 5 to 2 and they are not able to deal with their caseload, with a 12-18 month backlog"

We work in a "heavy compliance and regulatory framework (with aviation and maritime), and there are extra levels all the time that adds to the overall workload. Workload has increased and is more complicated despite staff losses. There has been no review since the VRs of what we can drop."

"We are overloaded with compliance. More obligations but less people to do it."

"What we are doing is changing but there is a change in workload [increase] with no extra people. We are trying to do more all the time without looking at staffing."

The AAD has been affected by the Government's Average Staffing Level cap, which aims to keep the general government sector (excluding military and reserves) around or below 2006-07 levels (167,596 ASL),³ with members reporting that *"even where we have the dollars we can't employ until someone leaves (because of FTE caps)"*. As in other agencies, members report that the AAD is trying to identify ways to get around the arbitrary ASL cap to try to staff the agency properly.

The AAD is structured into several branches based on their functions within the organisation. Staff losses through the redundancy process have been spread throughout the AAD, including the science, administrative and policy sections. Losses of non-ongoing staff through the recruitment freeze struck the science branch particularly hard. Historically the science branch has employed the majority of non-ongoing staff. Typically these are junior scientists and field researchers employed for the duration of a specific project. Member comments included that:

"Science (branch) is barely functioning anymore. A Canberra Department of Environment Executive said Science is 'discretionary'."

³ Commonwealth Government (2016, May). Budget 2016-17: Budget Paper No.4 – Part 2: Staffing of Agencies. Retrieved from http://budget.gov.au/2016-17/content/bp4/html/09_staff.htm

“Science is always the first to go because it is not a fixed cost (like maintaining a base). With the efficiency dividend we are being asked to do more with less.”

More resources are needed

The CPSU has significant concerns that the wider department views spending by the AAD on the scientific program as discretionary spending. This means funding for the scientific program is under threat whenever Budget cuts arise. The Science branch is particularly affected by cuts as a large portion of AAD costs are fixed because of requirements to maintain stations and other capital. The ‘discretionary’ spending on the scientific program inevitably suffers every time there is a budget cut or an increased efficiency dividend.

Short term political thought stands in the way of our “long term outlook. We have a 20 year strategy, but lack the funding security needed for our long logistics and staffing timeframes, instead we are forced into 12-monthly budget cycles”

This Inquiry may result in recommendations that require expansion of the AAD’s role that are not supported. This expansion would be largely welcomed by additional and members, however, only if accompanied by appropriate resourcing and staffing increases. Members were keen to draw the Inquiry’s attention to the need to repair existing staffing levels before additional work could be accommodated without impacting on quality and our international reputation.

If the AAD is to maintain its role of leading Australia’s Antarctic program, it needs to be adequately resourced and staffed. Under the current budgetary pressure, remaining staff are being pressed to do more with less, a situation that is clearly unsustainable. Without additional funding, the AAD will be forced to scale back even further its activities and Australia’s responsibilities in the Antarctic and Southern Oceans. This in turn will affect Australia’s international reputation.

The CPSU has been far from the only voice calling for significantly increased funding for the Antarctic program. The CPSU notes that the 20 Year Strategic Plan placed great emphasis on the importance of maintaining Australia's leadership in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. The Plan recommended substantially increased funding for Australian Antarctic Science grants (and not at the expense of other core functions of the Australian Antarctic program), support for the operational capacity required to undertake such research, prioritisation of collaborative research and large field-based campaigns.⁴

The Plan recommended that funding for Australian Antarctic Science grants should be increased substantially to:

- Facilitate national and international collaboration in priority science in the Antarctic and Southern Ocean;

⁴ AJ Press (2014, July). 20 Year Australian Antarctic Strategic Plan. Retrieved from <http://www.antarctica.gov.au/about-us/publications/20-year-australian-antarctic-strategic-plan>

- Facilitate the planning and conduct of logistically complex priority research programs that may extend over a number of years;
- Encourage greater collaboration among nations in East Antarctica; and
- Demonstrate Australian leadership in Antarctic science. Funding for collaborative research should not be allocated at the expense of other core functions of the Australian Antarctic Program.

The Plan also recommended that in conjunction with an increase in Australian Antarctic Science grants, the Australian Antarctic Division of the Department of the Environment should budget sufficient appropriation to support the planning and conduct of major campaigns, particularly those that rely on complex logistics and which may extend over a number of years.⁵

The CPSU notes that the Senate Committee that inquired into Australia's future activities and responsibilities in the Southern Ocean endorsed Recommendation 28 of the 20 Year Australian Antarctic Strategic Plan, which proposed a comprehensive review of the budget and resourcing needs of the Australian Antarctic Division, and recommends that this be adopted and undertaken by the government as soon as practicable.⁶

The CPSU notes that the Federal Government used the 2014-15 Budget to announce several funding measures aimed at boosting Australia's presence in the Antarctic. This included \$24 million for a new Antarctic Gateway Partnership, with the aim of encouraging collaboration between the University of Tasmania, the CSIRO and the Australian Antarctic Division.⁷ While more funding is welcome, none of this investment will mitigate the substantial loss of science capabilities in the CSIRO and the AAD due to Budget cuts. The Budget cuts to the CSIRO and the AAD are short-sighted and will do lasting harm. These cuts undermine both Australia's strong track record of research in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic, and our international standing.

Work and funding responsibilities are being outsourced

The CPSU notes there is an increased focus on using private/public partnerships and philanthropists to assist with funding. There are concerns, however, that this comes with some obligations and expectations that may run contrary to what the Antarctic mission should prioritise.

An 'Antarctic Foundation' is currently being established to collect corporate and individual philanthropic donations. This is likely to be administered by the AAD, although a specialist consultant has been engaged to set it up. There is an increased focus on philanthropic funding and some work is being outsourced to universities.

⁵ AJ Press (2014, July). 20 Year Australian Antarctic Strategic Plan. Retrieved from <http://www.antarctica.gov.au/about-us/publications/20-year-australian-antarctic-strategic-plan>

⁶ Senate Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade (2014, 29 October). Australia's future activities and responsibilities in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters. Retrieved from http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Southern_Ocean_and_Antarctic_waters/Report

⁷ Jake Sturmer, Lexi Metherell and Alex McDonald (2014, 5 May). Budget 2014: Scientific, environment organisations respond to planned cuts. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-05-14/scientific-environment-bodies-respond-to-planned-budget-cuts/5452426>

Philanthropic funded projects often have a much shorter turn-around and planning phase than AAD organised projects. This change is difficult for the AAD to adapt to due to their long lead-in times in relation to seasonal planning, and exacerbated by current staffing and workload issues.

There is also a range of work that will not be done if the work is outsourced or reliant on philanthropic or private sector funding. Some examples of this are long-term monitoring of sea bird populations, moss beds and how they respond to climate change and underlying basic statistical collection that is necessary to write management plans such as the impact statement for a new runway. As one member stated *"there is work that won't be done by universities, because it is not sexy, but it is core to our obligations under the EPBC Act [Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999]"*

Australia's scientific research program has global impact

The AAD's scientific program conducts research into a range of critical issues that have a global impact including climate change, the human footprint in Antarctica, the conservation of Antarctic and Southern Ocean wildlife and the sustainable management of Southern Ocean fisheries in the face of increasing demands for food security caused by human population growth.⁸

The AAD is not the only Commonwealth body engaged in Antarctic science. The CSIRO also conducts key Antarctic scientific activities that have a global impact, for example, examining the interaction between Antarctic ice sheet and surrounding ocean to better understand climate change.⁹ Like the AAD, the CSIRO's capacity to undertake these activities has been under threat from budget cuts and it has provoked global concern.

The CPSU notes that an open letter from over 2,800 international climate scientists from close to 60 countries was sent to the Government and the CSIRO Board in response to cuts to the Australian CSIRO's Oceans and Atmosphere research program.¹⁰ Signatories expressed that it had *"alarmed the global climate research community. The decision to decimate a vibrant and world leading research program shows a lack of insight, and a misunderstanding of the importance of the depth and significance of Australian contributions to global and regional climate research. The capacity of Australia to assess future risks and plan for climate change adaptation crucially depends on maintaining and augmenting this research capacity."*

Australia's climate science is world class. Building this research capacity and expertise within CSIRO has taken decades. Long-term strategic investment in climate science is critical for monitoring, modelling, understanding and predicting future climate variations and trends. Measurements that underpin climate research

⁸ Department of the Environment and Energy (2015, 27 November). Australian Antarctic Division: Leading Australia's Antarctic Program. Retrieved from <http://www.antarctica.gov.au/science>

⁹ Matt Marrison (2016, 20 December). Antarctic research without breaking the ice. ECOS. Retrieved from <https://blogs.csiro.au/ecos/antarctic-research-breaking-ice/>

¹⁰ An open letter to the Australian Government and CSIRO (2016, 11 May). Retrieved from <https://www.csiro.au/~media/News-releases/2016/Climate-change-response/AustraliasClimateResearchIsFarFromDone.pdf>

are irreplaceable and invaluable. If observing and modelling capacity is lost, so too is Australia and the World's ability to understand and prepare for climate change.

CSIRO is widely recognised as one of the leading climate measurement centres in the world. CSIRO has considerably expanded its capabilities in global atmosphere, ocean, land surface and ocean biogeochemical modelling, and is now widely recognised as a world-leading modelling centre. The Southern Hemisphere will be left with no sustainable, world-class climate modelling capability if the CSIRO cuts are realised.

Without CSIRO's involvement in both climate measurement and modelling, a significant portion of the Southern Hemisphere oceans and atmosphere will go unmonitored. Understanding how current and future climate changes are realised in this region will be seriously compromised. Hence, the capacity of Australia to assess future risks and plan for climate change adaptation crucially depends on maintaining and augmenting the existing research capability.

The Antarctic program is in our national interest

Australia has long maintained a leading role in the Antarctic, Hobart has been a key gateway city to the Antarctic, alongside and in competition with others in New Zealand, South Africa, Argentina and Chile. Supporting the AAD is key to Hobart's regional economy, providing highly skilled employment and facilitating co-operation between specialist research organisations such as the CSIRO, Bureau of Meteorology and the University of Tasmania.

Funding reductions and job losses have not only affected the scientific program and reduced the amount of work undertaken but it also reduces Australia's international status and influence. For example, the job losses at the CSIRO and AAD have the effect of sending a signal to the international community that Australia's interest in maintaining sovereignty over its Antarctic claims is less important.

The underfunding of Australia's world-class Antarctic program has meant that other countries are filling the vacuum as they perceive an open space. The CPSU notes that China is heavily investing in its Antarctic presence with the announcement that it will build a fifth research base.¹¹ Funding pressures has meant that Australia's presence has been limited to the coast and it does not have the resources or equipment to develop a research base closer to the centre of the continent.¹²

The CPSU notes there appears to be a trend towards increasing militarisation of Australia's Antarctic mission. While countries cannot establish military bases under the Treaty they can use the military to re-supply and there has recently been a change of direction that has seen the AAD operate in collaboration with the arms of the Defence force. Currently the AAD are working with Defence in 'Operation Southern Discovery' and using cooperation with Defence staff as one way around

¹¹ Bill Birtles (2017, 26 May). Australia urged to spend more on 'criminally underfunded' Antarctic program. The World Today. Retrieved from. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-26/australia-urged-to-spend-more-on-antarctica-program/8561624>

¹² Alice Slevison (2016, 5 February). Considering China's strategic interests in Antarctica. Retrieved from <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/considering-chinas-strategic-interests-in-antarctica/>

staffing level caps. It highlights that the AAD does not have the budget or access to transport it needs and has to rely on Defence.

It is in the national interest that Australia properly resources its Antarctic mission to maintain its historic leading role and to ensure that it remains a peaceful, military-free continent.

Conclusion

It is essential and in the national interest that Australia maintains a leading role in the Antarctic. This requires the proper funding of the Antarctic mission and the associated scientific programs run by the AAD and CSIRO. A reliance on donations from philanthropists or universities to undertake work is not sufficient for this.

The use of Defence to get around staffing caps shows the Government's ASL cap needs to end and funding needs to be substantially increased to ensure Antarctic remains a peaceful, military-free continent into the future.

Funding models also need to take into account significant capital expenditure of the AAD and protect scientific programs from budget cuts and the impact of the efficiency dividend.