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The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

# **Report 384**

**Review of Coastwatch**

**Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit**

August 2001  
Canberra

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## Foreword

This report presents the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit's findings of its review of Coastwatch. The review arose from the Committee's statutory obligation to review reports of the Auditor-General.

The report can be seen as comprising three parts—a review of Coastwatch itself; the challenges facing Coastwatch; and whether, in the light of these challenges, a Coastwatch type organisation is the best option for the future.

The Committee has seen at first hand Coastwatch operations and has come to the view that recent changes prompted by the Prime Minister's Task Force review in 1999 have resulted in an organisation which is functioning well and using its resources appropriately. There needs, however, to be a clear statement from the Government, in the form of a publicly released charter, setting out what the Government regards as its expectations for Coastwatch. Such a charter would not only inform the public of Coastwatch's intended role, but provide a basis for the assessment of Coastwatch's performance.

The Auditor-General has criticised Customs for the performance measures for its Coastwatch output. The Committee agrees and has developed a model balanced scorecard for Coastwatch by which its performance could be measured. The Committee is also critical of the information about Coastwatch provided to Parliament by Customs at Budget time, for Additional Estimates and in the Customs annual report. The output price information provided is unclear and appears in part to result from a misalignment of the Customs output structure with its program structure. While such a mismatch may improve flexibility for Customs, a consequence is poor pre and post-expenditure accountability to Parliament.



There has been speculation that Coastwatch, as a program within Customs, may be too close to Customs to the detriment of services provided to other Coastwatch clients. The evidence provided by Coastwatch's clients, however, has not supported this view. From this and other evidence, the Committee concludes that the relationship between Coastwatch and its clients is sound. This is no doubt assisted by the recent practice of seconding a serving uniformed Australian Defence Force officer to be the Director General of Coastwatch. The Committee has recommended that this practice continue. Coastwatch-client relations has also been assisted through the development of memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between Coastwatch and its clients. MOUs clarify the roles and expectations of all agencies involved in the coastwatch function. However, some MOUs are yet to be completed and these should be finalised.

The challenges faced by Coastwatch are wide ranging and demanding. The Committee has discussed the challenges of the unauthorised arrival of suspected illegal immigrants, illegal fishing, the movement of people across the Torres Strait, and the issue of unauthorised air movements in northern Australia.

The Committee believes that Coastwatch is performing well in detecting and coordinating the interception of illegal entry vessels in northern and north-western waters. These boat people are easily detected by Coastwatch because they do not attempt to arrive covertly. Consequently, providing additional resources to Coastwatch or creating a coastguard will not stem the tide. The solution is to prevent people illegally setting out for Australia. To this end, the Committee is satisfied that the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs is making every effort to enter into MOUs with Australia's neighbours to thwart the people smugglers.

Regarding illegal fishing, the Committee considers that in northern and north-western waters Coastwatch's performance is limited by its ability to intercept the vessels it has detected, while in the Southern Ocean the limiting factor is one of actually detecting illegal fishers. The Committee has made a number of recommendations aimed at improving Coastwatch's performance in these areas.

The issue of unauthorised air movements (UAMs) was raised by the Auditor-General and the Committee has sought to ascertain whether the threat is real, and which agency should be responsible for addressing the issue. The Committee

believes that UAMs do not currently pose a threat, but has made a series of recommendations designed to place Australia in a strong position should a UAM threat materialise. The Committee has concluded that Customs is the agency which should take primary responsibility, but because UAMs pose a threat of national significance, Defence should be intimately involved in the contingency planning recommended by the Committee. Allowing Customs to assume responsibility and Defence to respond to UAM incursions may require amendments to legislation.

The Committee has evaluated various models for a future coastwatch function, including that represented by the current Coastwatch. The criteria used by the Committee has been whether the model provides better use of scarce resources and whether it will result in improved performance. The Committee has concluded that the current Coastwatch represents the best value for money. Indeed, Coastwatch could be regarded as an outsourced coastguard—its core function of coordination is retained, while its assets and the risks associated with asset ownership (performance, maintenance, repair and replacement) are borne by other entities. Such an arrangement allows flexibility in a world of changing threats and rapidly developing technology.

Attached to this report is a dissent. While it is regrettable that the Committee could not present a unanimous report, it is understandable because there is a minority view that an Australian Coastguard represents the best way forward. The majority of the Committee, however, firmly believe the weight of evidence is overwhelmingly against such a concept.

**Bob Charles MP**  
Chairman



## Membership of the Committee

**Chair** Mr Bob Charles MP

**Deputy Chair** Mr David Cox MP

<b>Members</b>	Senator Helen Coonan	Mr Kevin Andrews MP
	Senator the Hon Rosemary Crowley (from 12/10/00)	Mr Petro Georgiou MP
	Senator the Hon John Faulkner AM (until 12/10/00)	Ms Julia Gillard MP
	Senator the Hon Brian Gibson AM	Mr Peter Lindsay MP
	Senator John Hogg	The Hon Alex Somlyay MP
	Senator Andrew Murray	Mr Stuart St Clair MP
	Senator John Watson	Mr Lindsay Tanner MP
		Mr Kelvin Thomson MP

## **Membership of the Sectional Committee**

**Chair** Mr Bob Charles MP

**Deputy Chair** Mr David Cox MP

**Members** Senator the Hon Brian Gibson AM Mr Petro Georgiou MP  
Senator John Hogg Mr Peter Lindsay MP  
Senator John Watson The Hon Alex Somlyay MP  
Mr Stuart St Clair MP

## **Committee Secretariat**

**Secretary** Dr Margot Kerley

**Inquiry Secretary** Dr John Carter

**Research Officer** Ms Rebecca Perkin

**Administrative Officers** Ms Maria Pappas

Ms Nina Franklin



## Terms of reference

Following issues raised in *Audit Report 38, 1999–2000, Coastwatch—Australian Customs Service* the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit will inquire into the operations of Coastwatch and in particular:

- the role and expectations (both public and government) of Coastwatch;
- the relationship of Coastwatch, as “service provider”, and its client agencies, as “service purchasers”;
- the effectiveness of Coastwatch’s allocation of resources to its tasks;
- new technologies which might improve the performance of Coastwatch;
- the adequacy of existing or proposed legislation which underpins Coastwatch’s functions;
- whether an Australian Coastguard should be created to take over Coastwatch’s functions; and
- any other issues raised by *Audit Report 38, 1999–2000, Coastwatch—Australian Customs Service*.



## List of abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AEEZ	Australian Exclusive Economic Zone
AEW&C	Airborne early warning and control
AFMA	Australian Fisheries Management Authority
AFP	Australian Federal Police
AMSA	Australian Maritime Safety Authority
AQIS	Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service
BCV	Bay Class vessel
CATO	Competency Assessment Training Officer
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPU	Coastal Protection Unit
Customs	Australian Customs Service
Defence	Australian Defence Force
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DIMA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
DoTC	Department of Transport and Communications

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DVP	Digital voice privacy
EA	Environment Australia
FLIR	Forward looking infra-red
FMA Act	Financial Management and Accountability Act
GBRMPA	Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
GSE	Ground support equipment
HDTV	High definition television
HFSWR	High frequency surface wave radars
HIMI	Heard Island and McDonald Islands
ISAR	Inverse Synthetic Aperture Radar
JCPA	Joint Committee of Public Accounts
MAB	Management Advisory Board
MOSAIC	Multi-operational surveillance and interdiction capability
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NSC	National Surveillance Centre
OPAC	Operations and Program Advisory Committee
PAES	Portfolio Additional Estimates Statement
PASC	Planning and Advisory Sub-Committee
PBS	Portfolio Budget Statement
PCAS	Pacific Corporation Aviation Service
PFR	Post flight report
PMTF	Prime Minister's Coastal Surveillance Task Force
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy

RF	Radio frequency
ROPAC	Regional Operations and Program Advisory Committee
SIEV	Suspect illegal entrant vessel
SLA	Service level agreement
SUNC	Suspect unlawful non-citizen
SWR	Surface wave radar
TAT	Telstra Applied Technologies
UAM	Unauthorised air movement
UAV	Unmanned aerial vehicle
UHF	Ultra-high frequency
VMS	Vessel monitoring system





## List of recommendations

### Recommendation 1

Coastwatch should undertake a comprehensive campaign to inform the public of its role in protecting Australia's borders. The campaign should be focused on the effectiveness of Coastwatch and how Coastwatch contributes to the outcomes of its client agencies. [Paragraph 2.19]

### Recommendation 2

Customs should use public relations or media liaison officers to manage and promote media reporting of Coastwatch activities. [Paragraph 2.20]

### Recommendation 3

The Government should provide Coastwatch with a charter outlining the Government's expectations. This information should be made publicly available. [Paragraph 2.40]

### Recommendation 4

The practice of seconding a uniformed Australian Defence Force officer to the position of Director General Coastwatch be retained. [Paragraph 4.37]

### Recommendation 5

Coastwatch should be able to access in a timely manner, vessel monitoring system data, therefore:

- Commonwealth legislation enabling the automatic monitoring of vessels should be amended to ensure the information passes on to Coastwatch; and
- the Commonwealth Government should enter into negotiations with State Governments with a view to enabling Coastwatch to have access to vessel monitoring system data. [Paragraph 4.76]

**Recommendation 6**

Based on Coastwatch's review of surveillance requirements in the Torres Strait, the Government should consider providing additional resources to increase surveillance coverage of the Torres Strait. [Paragraph 6.62]

**Recommendation 7**

Defence, Coastwatch, and Customs with advice from the Australian Fisheries Management Authority should review options for increasing Australia's ability to respond to illegal fishing in northern waters. If warranted, the Government should consider increasing Australia's response capability in northern waters. [Paragraph 6.79]

**Recommendation 8**

Defence should investigate, with subsequent advice to the Government, the cost of acquiring and outfitting a vessel to patrol the Southern Ocean and other remote areas, and the feasibility of mounting joint patrols of the Southern Ocean with other countries with an interest in the region. [Paragraph 6.124]

**Recommendation 9**

Defence and Coastwatch should continue to analyse the potential threats posed by unauthorised aircraft movements and develop response strategies. Once JORN is fully operational there should be an assessment of the frequency of unauthorised aircraft movements in the Torres Strait and Cape York. [Paragraph 6.155]

**Recommendation 10**

Defence and Coastwatch should develop contingency plans for the siting of sensors in the Torres Strait and Cape York to meet any identified unauthorised aircraft movement threat. [Paragraph 6.157]

**Recommendation 11**

Customs should promote the use of the Customs Watch free telephone line in remote areas for reporting suspicious aircraft movements and other activities. [Paragraph 6.158]

**Recommendation 12**

Customs, in consultation with other agencies, should create links and agreed protocols with law enforcement agencies of Australia's northern neighbours to enable the timely investigation of suspicious aircraft leaving Australian airspace. [Paragraph 6.160]

**Recommendation 13**

Customs, with advice from other agencies, should prepare a contingency plan for recommending to Government that the use of transponders on non-commercial aircraft be mandatory in areas where there is a demonstrated problem due to unauthorised air movements. [Paragraph 6.162]

**Recommendation 14**

Customs should review existing border legislation to determine whether it adequately allows Customs jurisdiction over UAMs entering and leaving Australia and the ability for Defence personnel, acting on Customs' behalf, to respond to UAM flights. The legislation should be amended if required. [Paragraph 6.173]



## **Preface—The Coastwatch experience**

To many, the word Coastwatch conjures up images of dedicated groups of people standing on cliff tops with pairs of binoculars scanning the ocean for unusual ship movements and other occurrences. Older readers may recall the coastwatchers of World War II who reported the movements of enemy vessels. Present reality, as the Committee found during its inquiry into Coastwatch, is far from this vision. The cliff tops are replaced by aircraft and the binoculars by sophisticated electronic equipment.

The Committee began its review of Coastwatch with an inspection of the new Coastwatch National Surveillance Centre. The centre was commissioned in April 2000 by the Prime Minister and occupies a floor of the Australian Customs Service headquarters in Canberra. The visit began with a briefing from Coastwatch officers who told the Committee that Coastwatch's area of operations cover 37 000 kilometres of coastline and an area of 9 million square kilometres of sea and ocean—an expanse one fifth greater than the total area of Australia.

Far from just observing ship movements, Coastwatch undertakes tasks requested by some nine Commonwealth agencies. These tasks can range from reporting the numbers of whales migrating along the coast to actively searching for missing yachtsmen. The most common tasks at the moment, the Committee was told, were to look out for boat people coming to the north west of Australia in small fishing boats, and to look out for illegal fishing boats mainly in northern waters. Occasionally Coastwatch was also involved in Customs and police operations against drug smugglers.

Essentially the role of Coastwatch is to coordinate various maritime and aircraft assets to undertake tasks requested by its 'client agencies'. The aim is to position Coastwatch assets to allow its clients to take further action if they so chose. For example, Coastwatch would use intelligence information to mount air surveillance patrols in certain areas to look for illegal immigrants arriving by boat. If a boat was detected Coastwatch would organise naval patrol boats to intercept. Upon arresting the boat the decision could be made whether to escort the boat to harbour or to transfer the people to the naval patrol boat. If the foreign boat was unseaworthy or posed a quarantine risk, perhaps because it was infested by striped mussels, it would be sunk at sea.

At the conclusion of the briefing, the Committee found that the briefing room was in fact a viewing gallery which overlooked the operations floor of the Centre. The Committee saw various Coastwatch officers at computer consoles which could take direct feeds from various intelligence sources. There were large wall screens which could also display the same information.

During the Committee's visit an officer was monitoring a screen showing a foreign merchant vessel making its way through the Torres Strait. This vessel had not 'reported in' its position and Coastwatch was considering whether to scramble one of the Coastwatch helicopters based in the Strait for interception. The officer had provisionally identified the merchantman from previous tracking information and the decision to scramble depended on whether the vessel kept to the international shipping lane.

The Committee was also told about the Customs Watch freecall number which can be used by members of the public to report suspicious activities. It was a direct line to the operations floor and calls were received at an average of one a day.

Before it left the operations area the Committee paid a brief visit to the secure communications area where classified intelligence was received from various sources including Defence. As the Committee departed, the Coastwatch officer was still tracking the foreign merchantman.

During September 2000 the Committee inspected Coastwatch facilities across northern Australia. The inspections commenced in Darwin with a visit to Defence's Northern Command Headquarters. There the Committee again saw officers in front of computer consoles and big screens taking direct feeds of surveillance information such as over the horizon radar data. Some of the displays on the big screens would have been the same as those occurring on Coastwatch's screens back in Canberra.

The Committee also visited Darwin Naval Base where it inspected the Fremantle Class Patrol Boat HMAS Dubbo. This has a crew of up to 23—a number which allows the commander to place steaming parties on vessels that are arrested. Moored alongside was the Customs Bay Class vessel ACV Arnhem Bay. This is of a similar size to the Fremantle, but only carries a crew of 8 with space for an additional 8 officers from Customs or other agencies.

While the Fremantle can carry more crew and can travel faster, the Bay Class has advantages as regard to the sophistication of the equipment it carries and ability to rapidly launch its small boat to deploy its boarding party. The Committee could easily see why the Fremantles are nearing the end of their useful lives, and how valuable their replacements recently announced in the Defence White Paper—with modern engines and up to date radars and communications equipment—will be to future Coastwatch operations.

Continuing its inspection of Coastwatch facilities, the Committee then divided into two groups. One group took part in a routine Coastwatch surveillance patrol to Broome via Ashmore Reef, and the other group flew to Broome along the Kimberley coastline.

Before boarding the Coastwatch surveillance aircraft, the Committee was briefed on safety aspects and donned life jackets in case the aircraft had to ditch in the ocean. When undertaking initial surveillance the aircraft cruises at a moderate altitude, but to identify the radar contacts it has to descend to a much lower height. (If there had been engine problems at this altitude there would have been insufficient time to put on safety gear. Suffice it to say no Coastwatch aircraft has ever suffered engine problems which caused it to ditch in the sea.)

During the flight the aircraft would cruise and pick up contacts with its surveillance radar. As it descended to identify the contact, the radar operator would cue the infra-red camera onto the target and record the vessel on video tape. This procedure continued as the patrol flew out to Australia's 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zone (AEEZ) limit and turned westward towards Ashmore Reef.

On eight occasions the aircraft descended to 'challenge' a yacht. The master would be asked to confirm the name of the vessel identified by the Coastwatch flight crew, indicate the last port of call, destination, and whether anything noteworthy had been seen. By this means not only is Coastwatch able to add to its store of intelligence information, but additional assurance is provided to yachtsmen sailing in remote and potentially treacherous waters.

As the flight neared the boundary of the AEEZ the Committee observed several Indonesian motorised fishing boats fishing outside 'the line'. These motorised boats are called Type 3 vessels and are not allowed to fish in Australian waters. Several small vessels were observed by radar several miles outside the AEEZ, but because of their position the aircrew decided not to divert to identify them.

The Committee also saw numerous sail powered Indonesian fishing boats (called Type 2 vessels) which are permitted to fish in some areas within the AEEZ. As well, the flight spotted three Type 2 vessels fishing illegally. A Fremantle patrol boat was duly dispatched by the Coastwatch National Surveillance Centre to intercept these vessels.

After an overflight of the Ashmore Reef area where again there were numerous Type 2 vessels the aircraft turned south for Broome. Type 2 vessels are allowed to fish by traditional methods around Ashmore Hibernia and Scott Reefs under an international agreement with Indonesia. In total the patrol made 120 contacts which included 56 Type 2 vessels fishing legally.

As the aircraft was making its way to Broome it overflew the Customs barge *Samson Explorer* which was ferrying suspected illegal immigrants from Ashmore Reef to Broome. Because of quarantine risks, the passengers on SIEVs arriving at Ashmore Reef are transferred to the *Samson Explorer* and the vessels are then sunk offshore. (The following day the Committee took the opportunity to inspect the *Samson Explorer* when it was moored at Broome Wharf.)

The next day commenced with a visit to the Willy Creek Detention Facility. The Facility is used to house Indonesian fishermen awaiting court appearance on charges of illegal fishing. The Facility is situated some distance from Broome and is home to several beached and battered SIEVs awaiting destruction.

Later in the day the Committee was due to return to Darwin with its two groups swapping places. However, there had been developments during the previous night because an early morning Coastwatch patrol flight had spotted a 'suspected illegal entry vessel' (SIEV) carrying suspected illegal immigrants. (The vessel may well have been one of the radar contacts detected beyond the 200 mile AEEZ line during the previous day.) The routine surveillance patrol had now been rescheduled as a tactical response patrol.

The SIEV was quickly located and the aircraft remained circling within radar contact of the SIEV as a Fremantle patrol boat converged on the vessel. The aircraft maintained its vigil until the Fremantle was able to make radar contact with the SIEV. Throughout this period and when it was able to resume normal patrolling, the aircraft was able to make other observations. It identified 14 Type 2 vessels legally fishing in the area.

During this time the other half of the Committee returned to Darwin on a flight which took in the Kimberley coast. The Committee quickly understood why it is important for SIEVs to be intercepted before reaching the Australian mainland. The area has few roads and its many islands are separated by channels which are subject to ferocious rip tides. The speed of these currents was clearly visible from the aircraft. (Indeed, the Committee was told suspected illegal immigrants had drowned in those waters after making landfall.) The Committee also saw a large crocodile swimming amongst the islands—another hazard for anyone swimming in the area—and a 40 foot whale with calf.

The following day the Committee flew from Darwin to the Torres Strait to inspect Coastwatch operations in that area. On route the Committee overflew Telstra's surface wave radar site on Bathurst Island. The radar was being trialed and has the potential to complement Australia's JORN radar.

When it arrived in the Torres Strait, the party was met at Horn Island by one of Coastwatch's helicopters which was to ferry them to Thursday Island. The helicopter had been newly added to Coastwatch's assets following the Prime Minister's Task Force Coastwatch Review. The helicopter is equipped with surveillance equipment and is able to undertake night-time operations. It is also equipped with a winch which has been used on several occasions during search and rescue operations.

The Committee arrived at Thursday Island just as the other Coastwatch helicopter returned to base. It had been involved in transporting quarantine officers between the islands to check AQIS's fruit fly traps and other disease monitoring stations. The Torres Strait is an area of high risk for exotic diseases reaching Australia from Papua New Guinea. Consequently, AQIS is one of Coastwatch's major clients in the region.



During its stay in the Torres Strait the Committee was briefed by Coastwatch officers and officers from its client agencies. The Committee was told of the unique challenges of the region. Under the Torres Strait Treaty with PNG, local people are able to freely move between the islands and the PNG mainland to undertake traditional activities. With such large numbers of people moving, many in small boats, between PNG and Australia and from island to island, the Coastwatch challenge is to identify non-legitimate movement. For example, the Australian Federal Police and Customs are concerned about people transporting drugs and other illegal items, both into and out of Australia.

The Committee returned to Canberra after its five day inspection tour tired but a great deal wiser about Coastwatch. It had witnessed the day-to-day reality of Coastwatch operations.

