

Coastwatch Inquiry

Mr. John Carter
Inquiry Secretary

As a retire Chief Inspector of Coastwatch I wish to make a submission to the JCPAA review of Coastwatch. I am of the firm belief that Coastwatch cannot function effectively as a sub program of Customs and I will focus on the relevant items to support this statement.

- The relationship of Coastwatch, as “service provider”, and its client agencies, as “service purchasers”.

Customs is both a client and, despite the organisation diagrams, the controller of Coastwatch. Throughout the time this situation has existed, whenever there was any hint of Customs/Barrier interest the aircraft were moved to that area. There were times when this was justified however, there have been many instances where assets were wasted. There are records of all 3 Dash8 aircraft foregoing programmed surveillance for a Barrier Operation that lasted many days. On one occasion a Dash8 aircraft was moved from surveillance at Darwin to Brisbane so that it could provide familiarization flights for Customs senior officers. Whenever an operation moved to a climax, senior Customs members invaded the Operations room which put pressures on the Operations staff. The positioning of Coastwatch as a sub-program of Customs precludes unbiased service to all clients.

- The effectiveness of Coastwatch’s allocation of resources to its tasks.

Coastwatch is an aviation based program. Coastwatch aircraft are crewed by professional aviators, who are trained and capable aircrew however, Customs Officers control the programming and allocation of all Coastwatch resources. In the Regions, these Officers are brought in from other Customs programs and only stay in the position for about 3 years. Initially these Officers have no idea of aircraft operations, which leads to major errors in programming. The 3-year tenure ensures that as they come to terms with the job they are moved on. When I left Coastwatch, other than the CATO group, only 3 Officers of Coastwatch Customs had any previous professional aviation experience. This ‘Customizing’ of Coastwatch positions was a continual process during my experience with Coastwatch as a Customs sub-program. The end result being a lack of professionalism and thus less effective allocation and control of resources.

- Whether an Australian Coastguard should be created to take over Coastwatch’s function.

The present system of having Coastwatch controlled by Customs reduces the effectiveness of coastal surveillance and precludes unbiased service to all clients. Coastwatch is too small to operate as a stand-alone group however; Coastwatch could be combined with Australian Search and Rescue (AusSAR), as a Coastguard, to mutual

advantage. I have considerable experience in both organisations and there are many parallel requirements in aircraft, aircrew and operational staff. Indeed the Coastwatch aircraft and crews are already suited for, and used in Search and Rescue (SAR). With the addition of drop capability the Dash8 aircraft would be ideal SAR platforms. The present Coastwatch system of contracted crews and aircraft has been found successful and should be retained. The search planning techniques and the Operational Control of Surveillance and SAR are closely aligned which would lead to a group of long term, professional Operations Staff and knowledgeable senior Directors.

The combining of Coastwatch and AusSAR as a 'Coastguard' would give a cost effective organisation which would be capable of providing Australia with a high performance surveillance and SAR service.

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