

## The committee's review

### Introduction

- 1.1 In February 1999 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage decided to undertake a review of the Department of the Environment's annual report for 1997-98.
- 1.2 The department's annual report was tabled in the House of Representatives on 11 November 1998. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Publications ordered it to be printed on 10 December 1998.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.3 Public service departments and agencies are held accountable to Parliament through a number of mechanisms. The first is through their minister, who is accountable to Parliament for the actions of his/her department. Secondly, section 25 (6) of the *Public Service Act 1922* requires that each departmental secretary prepare for his/her minister a report on the operation of the department during the year that ended on 30 June. In turn, the minister must table the report in the Parliament before 30 October of that year. (This was delayed in 1998 due to the federal election.)
- 1.4 Parliamentary committees also have an important role to play in ensuring departments and agencies are accountable to Parliament. Under Standing Order 324 (b), the annual reports of government departments and agencies are referred to the relevant House of Representatives Standing Committee for inquiry into any matter.

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1 Australia, House of Representatives 1998, *Votes and Proceedings*, no. 2, p. 31, and no. 15, p. 256.

- 1.5 These reviews of annual reports are an important way in which Parliamentary committees seek to hold the executive government accountable to the Parliament. By conducting its review of the Department of the Environment's annual report for 1997-98, the committee called the department, and through it the minister, to account for administration and planning of environmental programs.

## Conduct of the review

- 1.6 On 10 March 1999 the committee had a private briefing from Environment Australia, the major group within the Department of the Environment and Heritage. Following the private briefing, the committee held a public hearing on 31 March 1999. The committee did not call for submissions to the inquiry.

## The Department of the Environment and Heritage

- 1.7 In October 1996 the Minister for the Environment, Senator the Hon. Robert Hill, announced a restructure of the environment, sport and territories portfolio. In October 1997 the changes came into effect, with the former Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories becoming the Department of the Environment. The sport function of the department was transferred to the Department of Industry, Science and Tourism (now known as the Department of Industry, Science and Resources), and the territories and local government functions transferred to the Department of Transport and Regional Development.<sup>2</sup> Following the 1998 federal election, the department was renamed the Department of Environment and Heritage.
- 1.8 The Department of the Environment and Heritage comprises five major groups:
- **Environment Australia** - responsible for environment policy and programs, which are delivered by the Australian and World Heritage Group, Biodiversity Group, Science Group, Environment Protection Group and the Marine Group;
  - **Portfolio Strategies Group** - responsible for corporate management and coordination of the department's policy areas;

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2 Department of the Environment, *Annual Report 1997-98*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p. 2.

- **Antarctic Division** - responsible for policy and projects relating to Australia's activities in Antarctica;
- **Bureau of Meteorology** - a statutory authority which produces a separate annual report to the Parliament; and
- **Portfolio agencies** - including the Australian Heritage Commission; the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and Parks Australia. These agencies produce separate annual reports to the Parliament. The Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO) is also a separate agency under the environment portfolio. The department's annual report states that it expects that the AGO will make separate reports to Parliament in the future.<sup>3</sup>

1.9 While the department's annual report for 1997-98 covers all the above areas, the committee's inquiry has focused on Environment Australia and its programs. The committee decided to use its inquiry to highlight environmental programs and associated issues of interest, to make recommendations where appropriate and to identify matters that might require more detailed investigation.

1.10 As the department's annual report for 1997-98 was written almost one year ago, the committee acknowledges that some aspects of the programs it has investigated may have changed since the annual report was tabled in Parliament. Throughout this review of the department's annual report for 1997-98, the committee has noted new measures announced in the 1999-2000 federal budget which are relevant to the environment programs being reviewed.

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3 Department of the Environment, *Annual Report 1997-98*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p. 2.

