HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND INNOVATION

TABLING STATEMENT

Science Overcoming Salinity:
Coordinating and extending the science to address the nation's salinity problem

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Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Standing Committee on Science and Innovation, I present the report of the Committee's inquiry into the coordination of the science to combat the nation's salinity problem.

It is a unanimous report.

Science Overcoming Salinity: Coordinating and extending the science to address the nation's salinity problem deals with the coordination necessary to ensure that the best scientific knowledge to combat the salinity problem is applied on the ground.

Mr Speaker, we must ensure that farmers and catchment management organisations dealing with the salinity threat are equipped with the knowledge and resources to fight salinity. We must also ensure that our

science agencies and programs continue to develop economically viable salinity management options that can be readily adopted by land managers.

To address these issues, our report makes 24 recommendations across six themes.

First, the report recommends that regional planning and on-ground works to address salinity use the best available science as their basis, and that catchment management organisations and land managers be adequately supported to use science in their planning and salinity investment activities [Recommendation 1].

The second theme relates to research coordination. It is crucial that the nation's considerable investment in salinity research and development (R&D) not be wasted or misdirected.

A strong case was made for an on-going role in salinity R&D coordination at the national level.

Our report recommends that the *National Dryland Salinity Program* be retained and its functions expanded to include irrigation and urban salinity. Its research, coordination and communication strategies should evolve to meet the requirements of the new natural resource management environment [Recommendation 3].

Our report also recommends that a comprehensive audit of the Australian Government investment in salinity research be undertaken. An audit would bring greater coherence to the range of science investments, and assist in improving coordination with state and regional salinity research efforts [Recommendation 2].

The third theme relates to the adequacy of the existing science base and funding for future research.

Mr Speaker, the Australian Government is supporting a tremendous salinity research effort, through a range of national research agencies, programs and partnerships.

However, it is crucial that gaps in our knowledge be identified and addressed. For instance, many submitters called for more salinity management options that are profitable and can be adopted on a large scale. Thus giving land owners a greater incentive to directly address salinity.

Our report recommends that greater emphasis be given to the development of new, economically viable land and water use systems to combat salinity [Recommendation 4].

The Committee notes the emphasis in natural resource management policies on regional-level planning and delivery of programs, which we support. However, it is important that the regional focus not detract

from on-going research into solutions that are of statewide or national relevance.

Accordingly, the Committee recommends that provision be made within the *National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality* for the establishment of a salinity R&D fund, to finance research of this nature [Recommendation 8].

Our fourth theme concerns the importance of salinity mapping technologies and data management. The report recommends that governments expedite the development of data management systems that are standardised, integrated and accessible [Recommendation 13]. The report also recommends that managers of regional projects be equipped with the requisite skills to properly manage salinity data [Recommendation 14].

Our fifth theme, and in my view the most important, is the need to ensure that salinity research findings and tools are extended to users on the ground. In this respect, the report makes a number of recommendations including that governments consider establishing groups of mobile knowledge brokers to provide scientific and technical support to land managers [Recommendation 22]. The Committee also recommends that governments build on current efforts to establish a multi-tiered database of information and salinity research findings [Recommendation 15].

Traditional face-to-face advisory and support services for land managers, commonly referred to as 'extension' services, remain an important means of transferring information. The Committee urges governments, and in particular state governments, to not only maintain, but also improve, their support for these services [Recommendation 16].

The sixth and final theme of our recommendations is that the private sector be encouraged to undertake salinity research, development and extension activities.

Our report finds that the private sector are great innovators in the areas of salinity technologies, such as mapping techniques, and are increasingly involved in providing support services for land managers [Recommendations 11, 12 and 24].

I wish to thank my Committee colleagues for their bipartisan and thoughtful input to the inquiry at all times, particularly those who made time to undertake inspections across several states. Also, well done, the excellent Secretariat team of Catherine Cornish, Inquiry Secretary Jerome Brown, Researcher Zoë Smith and Admin Officer Suzy Domitrovic.

In closing Mr Speaker, I emphasise that salinity is a tremendous threat to our nation. It destroys productive land and imperils farmers' livelihoods, it reduces river quality and damages urban and public infrastructure. It threatens conservation reserves and biodiversity.

The Committee hopes that its report will indeed help to ensure that science can assist to overcome salinity.

I commend the report to the House.