
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Review of the Department of the Environment's annual report for 1997-98

House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage

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Foreword

This is the first report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage for the 39th Parliament. The report reviews the activities of the Department of the Environment as outlined in their 1997-98 annual report.

An important function of Parliamentary committees is to scrutinise government activity. 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. The committee believes that this provides an excellent opportunity for committees to hold government departments, and through them ministers and the executive government, accountable to the Parliament. It is also a useful mechanism for the wider community to hear detailed information about the activities of government departments and agencies.

The committee used its review of the Department of the Environment's annual report to investigate the department's activities in a number of important program areas, including rivers and water quality, national parks and reserves, environment reporting and marine management. The committee also used the review to follow up the department's progress in implementing the recommendations of a previous committee report on managing Australia's world heritage areas.

The committee encourages other Parliamentary committees to review departments' and agencies' annual reports. If they become a regular part of the annual reporting framework, these reviews will form an important part of departments' accountability and transparency before Parliament.

The committee appreciates the briefings and evidence it received from the Department of the Environment throughout the review, and looks forward to further dealings with the department throughout this Parliament.

In conclusion, I thank the members of the Environment and Heritage Committee for their contributions to the public hearing and to this report.

Ian Causley
Chair



Membership of the committee

Chair Hon Ian Causley, MP

Deputy Chair Mrs Julia Irwin, MP

Members Mr Phillip Barresi, MP

Mr Kerry Bartlett, MP

Mr Bruce Billson, MP

Mrs Chris Gallus, MP

Ms Jane Gerick, MP

Mr Harry Jenkins, MP

Hon Dr Carmen Larwrence, MP

Mrs Danna Vale, MP

Committee secretariat

Secretary Mr Ian Dundas

Acting Secretary Dr Sarah Hnatiuk

Inquiry Secretary Ms Bronwen Jagers

Administrative Officers Ms Helen Collins

Ms Marlene Lyons



List of abbreviations

AFFA	Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry - Australia
AGO	Australian Greenhouse Office
ANZECC	Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council
ARMCANZ	Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand
AUSRIVAS	Australian River Assessment Scheme
CNG	Compressed Natural Gas
CRA	Comprehensive Regional Assessment
ERIN	Environmental Resources Information Network
NFPS	National Forest Policy Statement
NWQMS	National Water Quality Management Strategy
RFA	Regional Forest Agreement



List of recommendations

Recommendation 1

2.32 The committee recommends that the Department of the Environment and Heritage, in conjunction with other relevant departments and agencies, undertake a review of programs addressing inland rivers and waterways. The review should consider:

- rationalisation of current rivers and waterways programs into a single river health strategy, incorporating and strengthening the National Water Quality Management Strategy;
- a proposal for developing mandatory national water quality standards; and
- development of a national database on water quality, incorporating data collected by the National Land and Water Resources Audit.

Recommendation 2

2.73 The committee recommends that the Department of the Environment and Heritage examine the extent to which data collected for other portfolio and agency programs is used in the compilation of the state of the environment report.

The department should then develop its state of the environment reporting framework around existing data resources as far as possible, to draw upon the whole of government's resources and its expertise across program areas. State of the environment reporting should provide a basis for future decision-making for all environment policies and programs.

