

INQUIRY INTO COASTWATCH

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS FROM JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND AUDIT ON QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT SUBMISSION

The role and expectations of Coastwatch

Question 1 *Reasons for proposed memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Coastwatch and Queensland Transport.*

Marine pollution surveillance may not be an official task allocated to Coastwatch i.e. a service that is specifically paid for by Queensland Transport, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) or the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA), but it is currently part of the standard tasking for all Coastwatch flights. However, the GBRMPA is allocated a block of approximately 1000 hours for surveillance broadly described as enforcement of the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act*. This official tasking on behalf of GBRMPA is currently paid for by the Commonwealth Treasury and surveillance information is passed directly to GBRMPA.

Informal arrangements are in place for reporting all suspected marine pollution incidents to AusSar's Rescue Coordination Centre in Canberra. This information is then relayed to AMSA and GBRMPA as appropriate. In cases where the reported incident falls within the Queensland jurisdiction, AMSA will usually pass on the information to Queensland Transport. While this informal arrangement generally works, in practice there are sometimes significant delays in information flow that could be rectified by a more direct relationship between Coastwatch and Queensland Transport.

To date the Queensland Government has not formally attempted to initiate a MOU between Coastwatch and Queensland Transport, GBRMPA and AMSA. Coastwatch has informally advised that they are only able to enter into MOUs with Commonwealth agencies.

Question 2 *Value of increased liaison between the Queensland Police Service (QPS) and Coastwatch concerning gathering and distribution of intelligence on unlawful marine activities.*

The level of coordination between QPS and Coastwatch in the north Queensland region is effective. However information that Coastwatch gathers as part of its coastal surveillance activities may have strategic importance on a broader level for QPS.

Strategic intelligence gathered by QPS in the sphere of unlawful marine activities may also be useful for assisting Coastwatch in the deployment of their resources. Currently, if QPS needs to investigate possible unlawful marine activities it tasks its

own aircraft. There is no formal routine operational liaison on a State-wide basis between Coastwatch and the QPS to ensure the tasking of costly resources is not duplicated.

There are two general types of offences where Coastwatch could be used, the first being a joint investigation by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), Australian Customs Service (ACS) and the QPS. The other type is where the offence has been committed in Queensland and the movement of the offender is within Queensland. An example of this second type of offence would be an offender trafficking in drugs and moving between communities in the far north of the State using waterway and/or off-shore waters.

It is difficult to make a comprehensive assessment of the timeliness of the information flow between Coastwatch and QPS through AFP channels. While in some local areas there is direct contact between QPS and Coastwatch, it is not known whether information provided to AFP by Coastwatch, which might be of assistance to QPS, is forwarded.

Recently QPS has nominated a State liaison officer for Coastwatch. It is anticipated that inter-service networks and lines of communication will be developed to improve service delivery and achieve a reduction in duplication of resources. The proactive role in the dissemination of Coastwatch information being taken by the National Surveillance Centre in Canberra is also expected to address previous concerns.

The monitoring of Queensland's commercial fishing vessels

Question 3 *Access to information from the Department of Primary Industries' vessel monitoring system for the commercial fishing fleet.*

The vessel monitoring system (VMS) has been progressively introduced into the Queensland commercial fisheries for management and compliance purposes since the *Fisheries Act 1994* was amended in 1997. This amendment permits the VMS to be used to determine the location of individual fishing boats.

There are now approximately 700 commercial fishing boats fitted with VMS and experience has shown over the past three years that the units are extremely effective for this purpose. It is anticipated that further commercial fisheries could be required to implement VMS within the next two to five years, which is likely to double the number of fishing boats fitted with VMS.

VMS is managed and controlled centrally from the VMS operations room in Brisbane. On-line VMS capabilities are also provided to ten client stations (regional offices) along the coast and five mobile stations (patrol boats) linked to the central station.

While Coastwatch has informally expressed interest in accessing the VMS data, the Queensland Fisheries Service has not received any formal request from Coastwatch. Without a formal request from Coastwatch detailing their specific requirements it is difficult to comment any further on the likelihood of Coastwatch being granted access to the data.

The *Fisheries Act 1994* governs access to VMS data. Legal advice obtained on the interpretation of the access provisions suggests that VMS data may only be used for the purpose for which it was collected. To date no on-line data has been made available to any external agency.

Question 4 *It could be argued that information on fishing vessel location would indicate where fish are to be found and consequently could indicate where fish poachers might be active. Coastwatch's targeting that area would therefore assist Queensland fishery management. Comments?*

The role of protecting fisheries from poachers, usually international vessels, lies with the Australian Fish Management Authority (AFMA). It is understood that the AFMA also has vessel monitoring units on a significant number of fishing vessels and does not routinely provide data from the units to other agencies. It may be more appropriate to direct this question to AFMA.

Question 5 *If Coastwatch had access to the location of vessels of the Queensland fishing fleet, Coastwatch could help Queensland to monitor the integrity of the system – Coastwatch could check whether Queensland vessels are deactivating the monitoring system to gain a commercial advantage if they come across a concentration of fish. Comments?*

The VMS system has been designed to automatically monitor the integrity of the system in terms of whether operators have deactivated the unit (such as powering off, power disconnected, antennae cable disconnected and antennae blocked). In such circumstances the unit provides the relevant information to Queensland Fisheries Service, including the position, time and boat identification. Several successful prosecutions have been made for offences relating to interference with the VMS using such information. The issue for the Fisheries Service is not identification but rather enforcement once identified. It is not envisaged that there is a role for Coastwatch in this respect.

The effectiveness of Coastwatch's allocation of resources

Question 6 *In view of the additional resources allocated to Coastwatch – a new helicopter in the Torres Strait and additional fixed wing aircraft, do you still consider Coastwatch's resources to be inadequate? What level of resources would be considered adequate?*

Effective surveillance of Queensland's coastline will always be difficult in view of its particular features: extent; proportion of the coastline that is isolated; level of offshore maritime activity associated with fishing and tourism industries; its proximity to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park with its associated need for protection; and its proximity to neighbouring nations. The degree of resources required to comprehensively provide surveillance largely depends on adequate risk assessment.

A number of Queensland agencies deploy aerial and marine resources on a regular basis to carry out their functional responsibilities. Effective coordination of intelligence gathered by Coastwatch and the State agencies, through agreed arrangements, could optimise the use of existing resources. Until this situation has been achieved it is not prudent to specify what is the appropriate level of resources for Coastwatch. The impact and value of emerging technologies in radar coverage of the coastline also require full assessment before the appropriate level of aircraft resources can be determined.

New technologies

Question 7 *The submission advises that a recent international agreement has resulted in plans to require the carriage of automatic identification systems for vessels, but that the establishment of shore monitoring stations will be expensive.*

Value of such systems

Compared to air traffic, under present arrangements ships are virtually unidentifiable at sea. The introduction of the Universal Automatic Identification System (AIS) will greatly enhance Queensland Transport's ability to identify ships that pass through Sate and Great Barrier Reef waters. When fully operational the AIS system has the capability of assisting with shore based identification, tracking and monitoring of ships, subject to the installation of suitable shore stations.

While working in the ship to ship mode the system will also help ships' crews to avoid collisions or close quarter situations and will promote general safety by providing them with clear real time information on local vessel traffic. From a surveillance perspective AIS could help by providing information to Coastwatch that would allow targeted surveillance of targeted ships transiting the region.

Cost of installation of shore stations

Estimates of costs associated with the installation of shore stations are currently being developed.

Commonwealth assistance sought?

The current ship reporting system (SRS) is jointly funded by Queensland Transport and AMSA. It is expected that AMSA will continue to contribute a significant amount of funding to implementation and maintenance of the AIS project as an extension of the present SRS.

Estimated cost savings

It is extremely difficult to quantify likely cost savings in dollar terms at this stage of the project. However, the project should be viewed in the context of increased maritime safety and preservation of cultural, economic and socio-economic values associated with the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Introduction of AIS will also assist Australia in meeting a number of international obligations including those associated with the protection of the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef.

Question 8 *Queensland is trialing a transponder system for vessels within the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait Region, REEFREP SRS.*

Update on the trial

The trial, which involves testing AIS transponders on four ships that regularly transit Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait waters, is due for completion in mid-December 2000. It is fair to say that to date the trial has been successful and has produced positive results in respect to the capabilities of the AIS.

Size of vessels expected to carry the transponder

The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) will require all new ships over 33 gross tonnes (approximately 50 metres) built after July 2002 to be fitted with an AIS transponder by 1 July 2008.