

Senate Standing Committee on Economics
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Portfolio
Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearing 2009-10
21 October 2009

AGENCY/DEPARTMENT: OFFICE OF THE CHIEF SCIENTIST

TOPIC: Climate Change

REFERENCE: Question on Notice (21 October 2009, E36-37)

QUESTION No.: SI-29

Senator Abetz—Did the Australian approach you to respond to Senator Fielding’s opinion piece?

Prof. Sackett—They approached my office, yes.

Senator ABETZ—And did you decline because of a then time limit that was imposed?

Prof. Sackett—I would have to take on notice the exact exchange of correspondence between my office and the Australian, but I think I could probably give you the most relevant answer, which is that I am respecting the private nature of the briefing that was requested by Senator Fielding. And that was an answer that I believe we gave the Australian.

Senator ABETZ—Sorry?

Prof. Sackett—I believe—but, as I said, I would like to check the exact correspondence that went back and forth. But we received many queries, in fact, to the office, and the response was—and I cannot tell you if that was specifically the response that was given to the Australian in this instance—that I was respecting the private nature of the briefing that was requested by Senator Fielding.

Senator ABETZ—The Australian on 17 June 2009, under the heading ‘Penny for her thoughts’—a funny play on words—on the climate change issue, says:

... opinion editor Rebecca Weisser has been doing her level best to persuade the government’s chief scientist ... to help Fielding out by writing a piece in reply. Her assistant helped Sackett dodge the bullet by saying she couldn’t possibly make the deadline ...

I want to know whether the reason was given that you could not because of a deadline. The Australian then assert they bounced back and said, ‘Fine, no deadline; whenever,’ and they have not had a response.

Prof. Sackett—I do believe it is incorrect, and I am happy to take that question on notice—that we did not respond. I think that is incorrect, and I am happy to confer and get back to you on the question.

ANSWER

On Tuesday 9 June 2009, the Office of the Chief Scientist was contacted via telephone by a journalist from *The Australian* asking if the Chief Scientist, Professor Penny Sackett, would write an opinion article responding to the scientific questions raised by Steve Fielding. The deadline was stated within the following two days.

The Media and Policy Adviser for the Chief Scientist responded that Professor Sackett was currently out of the office and would be travelling interstate over the next couple of days, but advised that she would discuss with Professor Sackett as to whether she would agree to prepare an opinion piece. The Office requested that a formal request be sent by email.

After confirming Professor Sackett's travel schedule and other commitments, the Office responded to the Opinion Page Editor at *The Australian* that Professor Sackett would not be able to meet the deadline and thanked her for the offer to write the opinion piece.

The Australian responded and asked whether it would be possible for Professor Sackett to write the piece for the following week. On Wednesday 10 June 2009, the Office of the Chief Scientist responded again saying that Professor Sackett was unable to do so due to travel and other commitments. The Office received no further correspondence from *The Australian* about this matter.

The following week, Professor Sackett met with Senator Fielding, along with Senator Wong and Professor Will Steffen to discuss Senator Fielding's concerns about climate change. Professor Sackett declined all requests from media to comment on this meeting as she was respecting the private nature of the briefing that Senator Fielding had requested.