

Senate Standing Committee on Economics

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Resources, Energy and Tourism Portfolio
Supplementary Budget Senate Estimates
21 October 2009

Question: SR-10
Topic: Data acquisition - Middleton and Elizabeth Islands / reefs
Proof Hansard Page: E93-E94

Senator Abetz asked:

- Senator ABETZ**—That includes me. If I may quickly ask: can you tell me what amount of money has been spent on data acquisition in the region of the Middleton and Elizabeth Islands and adjacent waters since 2003?
Dr Pigram—I would not have the precise figures for you. Can I take that on notice?
- Senator ABETZ**—I have no choice but for you to do so, so thank you for that. Can I provide—via the committee—a copy of a map to you, Dr Pigram? It is entitled *Area of proposed AUSGEO offshore energy security program in relation to Australia's potential maritime zones. If Australia lost sovereignty over Middleton and Elizabeth reefs as islands and they cannot qualify for EEZ status*. That is the heading on this particular map. This map is sourced from Geoscience Australia, Commonwealth of Australia, but can I ask you about the title on the map? I assume that title was not put on that map by Geoscience.
Dr Pigram—I think I would be confident in saying that, Senator.
- Senator ABETZ**—Just so that there is no misinformation in the public arena. Other than that heading, you would identify the rest of that map as a Geoscience map? If you want to take that on notice to get that absolutely clear, that is fine.
Dr Pigram—We will do that, Senator.
- Senator ABETZ**—Are you able to tell us on what basis the arcs on the map were drawn? You could take that on notice as well.
Dr Pigram—Certainly.
- Senator ABETZ**—When and under what circumstances did Middleton and Elizabeth reefs become regarded by your organisation as being Middleton and Elizabeth islands, such as to support its own EEZ? Because if you have a look at this map with the arc there are areas outside it which are less than 200 kilometres from those reefs.
Dr Pigram—My understanding—and I am happy to take it on notice—is that neither of those reefs has been used in the calculation of the Australian jurisdiction, both in relation to the 200 nautical mile zone or in relation to the area of delineation with France and Australia.
- Senator ABETZ**—If you could provide us with an explanation as to why the arcs were drawn where they were on that map it would be helpful.
Dr Pigram—The arcs that are drawn on here, I would suggest, are not ours but we will provide you with advice on that, particularly the ones that are shaded in grey. I will take that on notice.
Senator ABETZ—On this map I think it is blue and red. You have a photocopy.
Dr Pigram—I understand that.

7. **Senator ABETZ**—Thank you for your forbearance. Do we have any preliminary views as to what the value of the underwater assets or resources may be?

Dr Pigram—Not at this time, Senator.

Senator ABETZ—You have no idea at all?

Dr Pigram—We would have some ideas around what the long-term potential may be but we would not have any basis on which to quantify those.

Senator ABETZ—The hydrocarbons and other materials that may be under the waters near those reefs/islands will be of potential significance to our economy in the future. If you could provide me with any advice of preliminary resource value, I would be much obliged, and thank you for the committee's forbearance.

Answer:

1. There have been three surveys undertaken since 2003 that lie within the broad region (within 400km) that could be considered adjacent to Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs. The combined cost of these surveys was approximately \$9.43 million.
2. The title was not put on that map by Geoscience Australia.
3. Geoscience Australia did not produce the map tendered.
4. Geoscience Australia did not produce the map and therefore cannot comment on the basis on which the arcs were drawn.
5. The geographic names of these features remain Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs; the name of a feature has no bearing on its capacity to generate maritime zones. Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs were used by Australia and accepted by France as capable of generating the full range of maritime zones during the negotiation for the maritime delimitation agreement signed between the two countries in 1982, this would include the EEZ. This would appear to be the first time that the status of these features was considered by this Organisation (through its predecessors).
6. Geoscience Australia did not produce the map and therefore cannot comment on the basis on which the arcs were drawn.
7. There is insufficient data to make any meaningful estimate of the value of the resources in the region of Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs at present.