

EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING

SENATE LEGISLATION COMMITTEE - QUESTIONS ON NOTICE 2004-2005 ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES HEARING

Outcome: CSIRO
Output Group: CSIRO

DEST Question No. E839_05

Senator Stott Despoja provided in writing.

Question:

CSIRO – Relationship with Dr P Pockley

Why was it impossible for CSIRO to maintain a working relationship with Dr Pockley?

Please detail the 'excessive' requests that CSIRO could not meet, the reasons why those requests could not be met and all the reasons for ending communication with Dr Pockley.

What measures were taken to meet Dr Pockley's requests? Was any effort made to respond to Dr Pockley's requests after his deadline? If not, why not?

What actions were taken to ameliorate the relationship with Dr Pockley?

Considering CSIRO's expressed desire to "reopen that dialogue" with Dr Pockley, what actions are now being taken to achieve this? What measures have CSIRO put in place to ensure such a communications breakdown will not happen again?

Is it appropriate for CSIRO to not communicate with any journalist?

Answer:

CSIRO has provided the following response.

Communications - Relationship with Dr P Pockley

CSIRO does not believe it is impossible to maintain a working relationship with Dr Pockley.

CSIRO has only a partial register of the email traffic relating to Dr Pockley's requests for information. However, we have logged, for example, 52 emails from Dr Pockley in 2002 alone, at times four to six emails in one day and each request often composed of many parts. The volume of questions, the detail required, timelines demanded and resources available, meant that it was impossible to deal with all Dr Pockley's requests. It would have been necessary to divert scarce resources to meet his requests which we regarded as being unreasonable. Importantly, we needed to maintain a balance between Dr Pockley's needs and those of other science journalists. Two examples of Dr Pockley's requests are detailed:

- At 9.31am on 9 March 2004 Drs Garrett and Sandland received a request for answers to 6 detailed questions by 'NOON TODAY'.
- On 28 March 2004, Dr Pockley sent a letter to Drs Garrett and Sandland requesting answers to 15 detailed questions by noon 30 March.

In many cases answers were provided to Dr Pockley. In other cases, where the deadline had passed, we were simply unable to meet his requests, due to a lack of time and resources.

In another case when Dr Pockley was planning to write an article about Flagships and was interviewing P-Health Flagship Director, Dr Richard Head, Dr Head felt that answering a string of pointed email questions was an inappropriate way to conduct the dialogue, so he invited Dr Pockley to Adelaide to see at first-hand and discuss in detail progress with the Flagship. Understanding that Dr Pockley is a freelance journalist, CSIRO offered to meet Dr Pockley's airfare. Dr Pockley was unable to accept the invitation.

Dr Garrett met with Dr Pockley on two separate occasions, once early in his term and the second in October 2003, as did Dr Sandland, in early 2003 and in October 2003.

Despite many attempts to meet Dr Pockley's demands for information, the columns written by Dr Pockley and related material were often highly personal, unbalanced and contained many errors of fact or interpretation. For example, on 6 March 2003 Dr Sandland pointed out to Dr Pockley that his March "Australasian Science" column contained 9 errors of fact.

On 24 May 2004 Dr Garrett emailed Dr Pockley to express his disappointment about the tenor and quality of Dr Pockley's commentary of CSIRO in his column 'Pockley's Razor' and indicated to him that until he demonstrated greater objectivity and balance in his writing that he (Dr Garrett) would not be available to respond to further requests. Dr Sandland indicated the same following later publications.

As stated earlier, CSIRO does not believe it is impossible to maintain a working relationship with Dr Pockley. Indeed, Dr Pockley continues to receive CSIRO media releases and access to information about its science.

Ms Staunton will seek a meeting with Dr Pockley to address any reasonable concerns he has about the interactions between himself and CSIRO. CSIRO will continue to maintain its relationships with a wide range of media.