

Australian Geoscience Council Inc.

The Council of Earth Science Societies in Australia



7 Landsborough Street
Griffith ACT 2603

4 June 2004

The Secretary,
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations
and Education References Committee
Suite SG.52, Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Email: eet.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

**Submission by Australian Geoscience Council to the Inquiry into the Office of the
Chief Scientist**

I have pleasure to attach the Australian Geoscience Council's submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist. If you need to follow-up on any of the matters raised, please do not hesitate to contact us.

I will be retiring as President from 8 June 2004, and Mike Smith will be the President from that date. His email address is: mike_rpgeo@optusnet.com.au.

Yours sincerely

David Denham
President



Submission by Australian Geoscience Council to the Inquiry into the Office of the Chief Scientist

Introduction

This submission is made by the Australian Geoscience Council, a consortium of nine geoscience societies, which has a combined membership of more than 7500 professional geoscientists. Our members work in diverse fields, embracing earth resource exploration (minerals, coal, oil and gas), environmental monitoring and remediation, geotechnical investigations, hydrogeology including groundwater management, teaching, and strategic and applied research. Science and technology are central to all these sectors as well as many others in our society, such as health, security, transport, biodiversity and energy to name just a few.

Because science and technology are so important for our future, the Australian Geoscience Council believes that the Office of the Chief Scientist makes crucial contributions to national planning for the future prosperity of Australia, and should be maintained. Addressing the terms of reference of this Inquiry we make the following comments:

1. The functioning of the Office of the Chief Scientist

The AGC believes the Office of the Chief Scientist has made outstanding contributions to Australia by raising the profile of science, technology and innovation both in the government and in the general community. The incumbent Chief Scientist and his predecessors have provided valuable input into the development of a range of government policies and *we strongly support the current role for the Office*, i.e.

- Provide *independent* advice on science, technology and innovation issues to the Prime Minister, and ministers.
- Provide a link between Government and science, engineering, innovation and industry groups, as well as links within government.
- Act as Executive Officer of the PMSEIC.

The Chief Scientist's Office is particularly valuable for analysing the big-picture longer term strategic issues that face the nation, and we would recommend that this aspect of the role should be included specifically when the next appointment is made.

2. Potential conflicts of interest arising from the dual role of the Chief Scientist

We believe that because the Chief Scientist position is part time, there is always the possibility of a perceived conflict of interest between his/her position in government and whatever the roles and responsibilities are for the other part time position, be it in industry, academia, or wherever.

This perception is inevitable, given that the occupant's role in government is associated with R & D, and it is more than likely that the Chief Scientist will be recruited from an R&D related sector in industry. The fact remains that, under the current arrangement where the Chief Scientist carries out two jobs, he/she will have only one brain and in that brain the compartments dividing the two jobs can never be completely separated.

The Australian Geoscience Council therefore recommends that in future, *Chief Scientists are appointed for 3-4 year terms on a full time basis*. They would then be clearly removed from the day to day operations and critical decision-making of another agency or company. We do not believe that under this arrangement the Chief Scientist would lose touch with the R&D situation in industry. In fact, if the job were made full time he/she would have more opportunity to appreciate and consider the key S&T issues facing the nation.

There can still be a perceived conflict of interest because of the occupant's background, but the situation is much more manageable.

3. The development of criteria for the appointment of the Chief Scientist through legislation

There are several ways the Chief Scientist could be appointed. At present he/she is employed under contract to the government, and in our opinion, this has worked well in recent appointments. However, a Statutory Appointment prescribed by legislation may be a better option. This would fully recognise the importance of the Chief Scientist and ensure that no future government could easily abolish the position.

In the past the Chief Scientist has had extensive experience in industry, and we believe that this criterion for the appointment should be maintained.