



Reef 2050 Plan

INDEPENDENT EXPERT PANEL – COMMUNIQUÉ 10 April 2024

The twenty-seventh meeting of the Reef 2050 Plan Independent Expert Panel was held on 10 April 2024 in Brisbane.

The Panel welcomed the new Chair, Professor Margaret Sheil, who had recently been appointed by the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) Ministers.

The Chair set the scene for this meeting by acknowledging current reports of the widespread (mass) coral bleaching event and the serious impacts unfolding across the Reef. Reports from expert presenters reaffirmed that increasing ocean temperature is the biggest threat to the long-term outlook for the GBR.

The Panel were comprehensively updated with the latest satellite and in-water survey results from data collected by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (Reef Authority) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The updates, which included results from the aerial surveys of more than 1000 individual reefs indicate the 2024 mass coral bleaching event is likely to be the most extensive to date. The severity of the coral bleaching impacts on reef communities will only be known once the complementary in-water surveys are complete.

Panel discussions on the unfolding Reef bleaching events were supported by papers from NOAA researchers and the Reef Authority on recent changes to frameworks for assessing and reporting coral bleaching and marine heatwave events. The Panel reinforced the need for greater clarity on reporting physical events (heating) and biological responses (bleaching) and to use available information to report as early as possible to Reef communities and stakeholders to reduce uncertainty and ensure the appropriate management action can be taken.

The Panel received extensive updates on a range of activities and programs from the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments, which was circulated prior to the meeting. The Panel enquired about the sequencing of the upcoming major report releases (Scientific Consensus Statement: Land Use Impacts on GBR Water Quality and Ecosystem Condition, GBR Outlook Report and GBR Water Quality Report Cards) and questioned officials on the approaching end of the Reef Trust Partnership in mid-2024 and the potential implications for Reef Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Program (RIMReP) and Crown-of-Thorns Starfish Control and Innovations programs.

The Panel received update on the Reef Water Quality Independent Science Panel's activities and recent topical debates. Both Panels committed to finding ways to work more collaboratively without duplicating consideration of issues.

Researchers leading the Reef Restoration and Adaptation Program (RRAP) provided an overview of the R&D program achievements and interim progress. Following this discussion, the Panel will identify a range of questions for RRAP researchers to provide

further detail on the underpinning science of interventions, including the criteria or frameworks used for selecting interventions for scaling and deciding when interventions should be discontinued. The Panel acknowledged the overall achievement and significant progress RRAP has made to date.

Throughout the meeting, the Panel reflected on its role and the scope and timing of matters being brought for discussion and advice. The Panel re-iterated the importance of its advice being sought sufficiently in advance of key milestones so that it can inform government decision-making.

The next meeting of the Panel is proposed for late July 2024.

Panel members

Professor Margaret Sheil AO (Chair)

Vice-Chancellor and President
Queensland University of Technology

***Dr Russell Reichelt AO FTSE**

Environmental science and sustainable use

Dr Richard Brinkman

Chief Operating Officer
Australian Institute of Marine Science

Professor Damien Burrows

Director of TropWATER
James Cook University

Professor Terry Hughes

Distinguished Professor
James Cook University

***Professor Catherine Lovelock**

School of Biological Sciences
The University of Queensland

Professor Helene Marsh AO FAA FTSE

Emeritus Professor
James Cook University

Dr Rebecca Bartley

Research Scientist
CSIRO Land and Water

Adjunct Associate Professor Stephan Schnierer

Southern Cross University
University of Canberra

***Ms Jane Waterhouse**

Senior Partner, C2O Consulting
Senior Research Officer, TropWATER, James Cook University

Dr Stuart Whitten

Research Director, Sustainability Pathways
CSIRO Environment

***Professor Matthew England**

Scientia Professor
Climate Change Research Centre
University of New South Wales

***Professor Tiffany Morrison**

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies
James Cook University
University of Melbourne

***Dr Mitchell Gibbs**

School of Geosciences
University of Sydney

* Apologies