



Reef 2050 Plan

INDEPENDENT EXPERT PANEL - MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 01 June 2023, 09:00am – 4:30pm AEDT

Venue: Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane and videoconference.

ATTENDEES

Members

Prof Ian Chubb AC, Chair

Dr Richard Brinkman

Prof Damien Burrows

Adj Assoc Prof Stephan Schnierer

Dr Rebecca Bartley (apologies 3:45pm – 4:30pm)

Prof Helene Marsh AO

Dr Stuart Whitten (apologies 1pm – 4.30pm)

Dr Russell Reichelt AO

Prof Kerrie Wilson

Dr Mitchell Gibbs

Prof Matthew England

Prof Tiffany Morrison

Ms Jane Waterhouse

APOLOGIES

Prof Catherine Lovelock

Prof Terry Hughes

Other attendees

Mr John Foster
Branch Head, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Ms Catharine van Moort
Director, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Mr Stephen Briggs
Assistant Director, Secretariat, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Mr Peter David
A/g Senior Policy Officer, Secretariat, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Ms Liz Borburgh
Policy Officer, Secretariat, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Dr Julia Playford
A/g Executive Director, Office of the Great Barrier Reef, Department of Environment and Science

Louise Smyth
Director, Office of the Great Barrier Reef, Department of Environment and Science

Dr Roger Beeden
A/g Chief Scientist, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Ms Margaret Johnson	General Manager, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
Ms Patricia Schluter	Assistant Director, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park
Dr John Rolfe	A/g Chair, Reef Water Quality Independent Science Panel
Ms Rebecca Gee	Principle Director, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water
Ms Rebekah Hamed	Director, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water
Dr Di Barton	Science Officer, Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.
Mr Jason Bayly-Stark	Assistant Director, Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
Dr Dylan Horne	A/g Director, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
Prof Hugh Possingham	Vice-chancellor's Senior Research Fellow, the University of Queensland
Dr Kaye Walker	Assistant Director, Great Barrier Reef Authority
Ms Diane Tarte	Member, Reef Advisory Committee
Ms Imogen Zethoven	Member, Reef Advisory Committee
Mr David Bobberman	Member, Reef Advisory Committee

1. Acknowledgement of Country
The Chair acknowledged the traditional custodians of the lands on which the meeting was held, and paid respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.
2. Welcome to Members
The Chair welcomed members and noted apologies. The Chair outlined the main items of business on the agenda, which would include an update on the Science Consensus Statement, briefing and discussion on vegetation clearing in the Great Barrier Reef (Reef) catchment, discussion on the Australian Academy of Science Reef Futures Roundtables and Reef Blueprint for Resilience, update from the Independent Science Panel, updated briefing and discussion on Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease, and an update from the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments.
3. Conflict of Interest
Panel members were asked to update their declared actual and perceived conflicts and the Chair outlined actions to manage potential conflicts in accordance with the Panel's protocol.

4. Panel Business

The Panel endorsed the minutes of Meeting 24, held on 15 November 2022, and noted that they would be published on the Panel's page of the Department of Climate Change, Energy the Environment and Water website shortly after this meeting.

5. Update on the Science Consensus Statement (SCS)

Ms Jane Waterhouse provided an update on the Science Consensus Statement (SCS):

- Significant progress has been made and the outputs to date are very impressive. They include a significant amount of information, and the challenge will be on how to communicate such a large amount of information and make it digestible for users.
- The questions are focussed on sediment run-off, pollutants including nutrients and pesticides and include human dimensions. Topic-based narratives including a summary of key facts per land use and ecosystem which will be explored to address questions and inform policy decisions.
- Each of the 30 Questions presented in the synthesis of evidence are undergoing external independent peer review. The entire peer review process was developed by an Editorial Board with input provided from the Australian and Queensland Chief Scientists. A consensus process will be undertaken in the second half of the year. The Independent Science Panel (ISP) has final sign off on the outputs of the consensus process, prior to additional external independent review which is also managed by the Editorial Board.
- The method is very structured and consistent, aimed at alleviating concerns raised with previous Consensus Statements.

The Panel inquired if the reviewers are comfortable with the cross-section synthesis and if there is a risk of gaps. Ms Waterhouse commented that the approach involved more material to process, and it will increase the time needed. There is significant value added by the level of detail and how the details are clearly backed by evidence. The cross-section synthesis builds on what was presented previously but provides different angles of inquiry and thereby includes more interactions with other factors like climate. It will highlight the areas where we do not have a lot of evidence, and where we are making big decisions.

6. Brief from the Chair of the Queensland Native Vegetation Scientific Expert Panel on vegetation clearing in the GBR catchment.

Prof. Hugh Possingham was invited by the Chair to brief the panel on vegetation clearing in the Reef catchments, following his experience with land clearing policy and management as part of his role on the Native Vegetation Scientific Expert Panel.

- The Native Vegetation Scientific Expert Panel recently delivered a report with 10 recommendations to the Queensland Government on vegetation and land clearing policy and management across the whole of Queensland.
- Prof. Possingham's presentation highlighted that there is increased investment needed and reef catchments are crucial to be prioritised due to their high species diversity.

The Panel discussed:

- The implications arising from two reports; one from the Queensland Native Vegetation Scientific Expert Panel and another from the Australian Marine Conservation Society (ACMS), including whether vegetation categories need to be remapped.
- The extent of biodiversity loss due to land clearing.
- Regional planning, which should include clear indication where particular prescribing permissible activities in designated areas rather than only prohibiting particular activities.
- Proposed solutions, such as extension officers and agricultural colleges.

7. Australian Academy of Science Reef Futures Roundtables

The Chair invited Dr Hayley Teasdale of the Australian Academy of Science (AAS) to present on the Reef Futures Roundtables undertaken from March to May 2023. Dr Teasdale presented the timeline of the Roundtables through to synthesis report and methodology review report. Reef Advisory Committee (RAC) members were invited into the meeting to join this session.

Dr Teasdale presented an overview of the Roundtable methodology and insights from the pre-roundtable survey data which don't form part of the draft synthesis report that Panel members had previously received.

Panel members thanked Dr Teasdale and commented that the verbal insights from survey data and written comments during the Roundtables provide a richer picture than the synthesis report.

The Chair invited comments from Panel members and RAC members on the findings and implications for the subsequent advice to Ministers.

Panel members expressed a range of views including:

- Sharp distinction between governance and management.
- The need to improve communication to decision makers and the public.
- Strong relationship of land and sea.
- Traditional Owner input is fragmented and not fully integrated into the reports, plans and activities.
- Gaps in understanding on the differential sensitivity of Reef species and ecosystems to the impacts of climate warming.

- Opportunities of the synthesis report are being addressed by the Reef 2050 Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Program (RIMReP).

Reef Advisory Committee (RAC) members were invited into the meeting to join this session. Members are senior representatives from various industry and community organisations whose role is to provide strategic advice on the implementation of Reef 2050 actions, stakeholder priorities, and highlight any emerging cross sectoral issues that need to be addressed.

- Early learnings from research and deployment of pilot projects provide interesting insights on how the success of projects may pan out.
- To consider if there is enough information from research to act on now.
- Difficulties in grant processes arising from the competitive nature of funding programs which can have adverse outcomes and can disincentivise collaborative approaches by proponents.
- Any regional planning should be preceded by discussions with local communities about 'regional futures'.
- There is an urgency to act on information we have and to continually improve the quality of information being used in decision-making to ensure it doesn't become outdated.

The Chair synthesised the main points arising from the discussion, which were agreed by the Panel to form the basis of the advice to Ministers, including:

- Stronger climate action as a global leader
- Reef modelling to show what it will look and function like in the near and far future.
- Evidence gaps hindering the acceleration of regional planning and ecological restoration.
- Regional planning includes landscape biodiversity planning, we need an alignment of renewable energy goals.
- The complexity of overlapping jurisdictions, needing a clear vision for the Reef and effective frameworks to support efforts towards our goals.

The Chair closed the discussion and thanked everyone for their input, noting that a subsequent Panel discussion will occur on day two of IEP 25 to further refine the points raised in this first session.

8. Reef Blueprint for Resilience

The chair introduced Dr Dylan Horne from the Reef Authority to present on the Reef Blueprint for Resilience.

Dr Horne outlined:

- The Blueprint is the next step of the Reef Authority's climate resilience and adaptation work.
- Since 2017 there have been major shifts in the strategic landscape resulting in increased opportunity and expectation of what the Reef Blueprint should cover.
- The new document has a wider scope and has more comprehensive actions and two commitments.

- The commitments are accompanied by six strategic goals with a vision and a series of five to ten actions to achieve them.

The Panel gave feedback on the scope of the Blueprint, questioning whether it would extend beyond the marine park boundary and cover the catchments, as well drawing links between this work and the EPBC Act reforms underway. Dr Horne responded that both areas had been identified as needing to be addressed and the feedback would be communicated to the Reef Authority. The revised Reef Blueprint is intended to be more holistic.

The Chair thanked Dr Horne and welcomed opportunities for further consultation on the Blueprint.

9. Update from the Independent Science Panel

Dr John Rolfe provided the panel with an update from the Independent Science Panel (ISP) as interim Chair. The ISP's role has been split into two:

1. Water Quality and
2. Regional report cards.

The Panel discussed:

- Monitoring of wetlands could flow into the regional report cards.
- The co-benefits of assessing wetlands.
- Modifying the targets to be more manageable and allow for adjustments based on rainfall.
- The need to identify large areas of land clearing that impact water quality.
- Interpretation of catchment data has challenges.
- New technology can support accounting for condition as well as extent of wetlands.
- Condition is assessed every two years via site visits. Measuring extent is more accurate and negates the added risk of bias that can occur in measuring condition.

10. Discussion on Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease options paper

The Chair introduced Dr Di Barton and Mr Jason Bayly-Stark. The Chair acknowledged a written response from Prof Terry Hughes, who was an apology.

Dr Barton presented on the risk of Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease entering Australian waters and potential management options.

The Panel made the following observations:

- The main issue is the lack of understanding of the likely causative agents and transmission pathways of the disease into Australian waters.

- There is not sufficient surveillance in the Pacific area, so once the disease enters the Pacific it will likely be too late for Australia.
- Bleaching is affecting hard corals whereas this disease has been affecting soft corals in North America and it should be treated as both a major biosecurity and biodiversity threat.
- Concerns about biofouling from recreational boats, which has been raised repeatedly.
- Australia needs a draft response plan well ahead of any likely transmission to our waters.

The Panel agreed with the Chair that an expert delegation of Australian researchers should travel to the Caribbean Region to further investigate the disease and the risks to Australia.

11. Update from Government

The Chair invited officials from government to present updates.

Ms Rebecca Gee (DCCEEW) introduced Mr John Foster as the new Great Barrier Reef Branch Head for DCCEEW and provided an update on Reef investment:

- Objective is to ensure the funding we have available goes to the right places and projects.
- Multiple streams of evidence are underpinning investment prioritisation, including the AAS Reef Futures Roundtable outputs, the subsequent advice from the Panel to Ministers, Alluvium water quality evaluation report and the Science Consensus Statement
- We are working on the Traditional Owner Steering Group setting up the Traditional Owner taskforce to roll out the Sea Country Alliance
- We are considering how to base decisions on more recently available evidence within the context of strict budget authorities.
- Where should the Government's funding go until 2030 while still being flexible and pivot when other sources become available.

The Panel discussed:

- Challenges of prioritisation and certainty of funding for on-ground delivery organisations
- The range of desired Reef outcomes from current investment levels and where there are still gaps in policy guidance
- The inability to scale up the provision of Traditional Owners knowledge, instead we need to look to each individual community for how best to engage and good policy can accommodate this

- The challenges of the scale of the Reef systems and its catchments, we need to address it as a whole while thinking about the different communities within the entire Great Barrier Reef System.

Ms. Rebekah Hamed provided an update on World heritage matters covering:

- Developments since the Government's response to the Reactive monitoring mission report including further focus particularly on climate change, water quality and fisheries.
- Open ended working group on climate change which is slowly but incrementally working through a process to update the draft Policy Document on Climate Action for World Heritage.
- Current minor update of the Reef 2050 Plan to reflect climate commitments.

Dr Julia Playford provided an update for the Office of the Great Barrier Reef, Department of Environment and Science.

- Recent National Emissions Inventory release shows QLD has nearly met the 2030 targets at 29% reduction due to reducing tree clearing.
- Queensland undertaken a recent budget process which sets near-term investment priorities.
- A recent Queensland investment of \$10 million into the Reef Credits project was intended to stimulate the market. Initially, the project will focus on assisting landholders to identify on-ground projects that can earn them Reef Credits and provide additional ongoing income stream.
- We are commencing a statutory review of the extent to which extent the Reef protection regulations been effective in reducing the load of dissolved inorganic nitrogen and sediment suspended in the water in the Great Barrier Reef catchment.
 - The review must be completed by February 2024, and a report on the review outcomes tabled in Parliament.

Dr Kaye Walker provided an update from Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority on the Marine Monitoring Program.

- Monitoring of water quality and the role of the inshore GBR region is underrepresented in Reef management discussions, public perception, and strategic climate change mitigation strategies.
- Inshore Reef region is critical due to its ecosystem connection of land and sea, and is important for shoreline protection, coastal stabilisation and Reef-wide climate resilience.
- Water quality and trace modelling from catchment through the inshore and to the Reef itself.
- Seagrasses and Carbon Dioxide sequestration is interlinked with wetland systems.

- A dashboard has been developed which will include flood event monitoring to increase our understanding and awareness of monitoring results and risk exposure from flood plume events.

The Panel discussed:

- How the ability of predicting flood plumes can aid management decision-making, increasing the efficiency of monitoring of impacts. Inshore systems have had long-term extreme events, high temperature and salinity variation and therefore exhibit resilience.
- Communicating that the discussion should include the entire Reef system and not just focus on the off-shore Reef, with the ecological and functional roles and pressures of the inshore and offshore Reef being clearly distinguished for management purposes.

12. Other Panel Business

The Chair concluded the meeting and reminded members that the Panel would reconvene for a second day of IEP 25 for further discussion and the AAS Reef Futures Roundtable synthesis report and the Panels advise to ministers.