



Reef 2050 Plan

The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP
Minister for the Environment and Water

The Hon Leanne Linard MP
Minister for the Environment and the Great
Barrier Reef, Minister for Science and Minister
for Multicultural Affairs

Dear Ministers,

On 15 November 2022, the Australian and Queensland government's joint Reef 2050 Independent Expert Panel (IEP) whose role it is to provide expert advice to the Australian and Queensland environment Ministers, discussed Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD). SCTLD is a rapidly spreading coral disease-causing high mortalities of corals in the Caribbean region, but as yet unrecorded in Australian Waters.

SCTLD was first detected in late 2014 on a reef system off the coast of Florida, USA, and has subsequently been detected in a further 27 countries within the Greater Caribbean area infecting a total of 34 different coral species. The disease has devastated infected reefs throughout the Caribbean area, and little is known about its transmission.

Preparing Australia for threat of Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease – Risk to Great Barrier Reef

IEP requested that the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) provide further information on SCTLD and its likely introduction to Australian waters, given the potential for shipping to present a vector for spread. At our 1 June 2023 meeting, the IEP considered the advice provided by DAFF related to the likelihood for SCTLD to arrive in and cause impact in Australian waters, and recommendations on approaches to resolving key information gaps. The IEP supports the need for urgent action to identify the causative agent of SCTLD, its mode of transmission and improve our understanding of the susceptibility of Australian coral species as their responses to the disease are unknown.

The arrival of SCTLD to the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) will have significant ecological and socio-economic consequences. The disease is a major biosecurity and biodiversity threat to Australia that could happen at any time. The unique reef species composition in the GBR system may make it more vulnerable than those reef systems in the Caribbean and it is likely that more species will be affected. Caribbean reefs have approximately 65-75 hard coral species compared to approximately 450 in the GBR. The arrival of this disease would catastrophically impact the Reef's ability to recover from acute and chronic stressors including marine heatwaves, Crown of Thorn Starfish outbreaks and poor water quality. As is currently being documented in the Caribbean, the combination of SCTLD with both anthropogenic and climate stressors is depleting the full spectrum of coral species.

Australia must be prepared to respond to, monitor for and build capacity to contain the disease before it reaches our waters. We note that the research partnerships with the Pacific countries and territories are part of the Australian Government's Pacific Biosecurity Strategy 2022-2027. SCTLD will also be devastating to our Pacific neighbours whose economies are strongly dependent on reefs. The message from the Caribbean is clear, once the disease arrives it will be near impossible to eradicate it, and there is a likelihood that the disease will reach Australian shores should it spread across the Pacific and enter Southeast Asian ports via shipping and other human vectors.

The IEP strongly recommends that Ministers agree to fund an expert team of Australian researchers to travel to the Caribbean as soon as possible to investigate the disease and:

- Identify the causative agent(s) and develop an improved understanding of the pathogen.
- Identify the particular characteristics of the disease that can be used to develop a monitoring program.
- Improve the emerging science on how to treat the disease.
- Formalise a program to develop a response plan for Australia now, before the disease arrives.
- The response plan could benefit from engagement with leading scientists from Caribbean Region, who have been studying the disease for nearly a decade.

These recommendations are in line with Strategic Action 3.8 under Work Area 3 of the Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan, to *enhance marine and island pest surveillance and prevention (including biosecurity)* with the goal that new outbreaks of disease are reduced and incursions of introduced species and pests are prevented.

Identifying the disease agent and mode of transmission is crucial to informing Australia's preparedness and response plan to SCTLD. We further understand that this evidence is necessary to support DAFF's consideration of any alternative or additional measures for the management of ship-mediated pathways (ballast water and/or biofouling) in Australian waters in accordance with the Australian *Biosecurity Act (2015)*, the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) *International Convention for the Control and Management of Ships' Ballast Water and Sediments (2004)* and the *IMO Guidelines for the Control and Management of Ships' Biofouling to Minimize the Transfer of Invasive Aquatic Species*, should vessels be confirmed to be a likely pathway for introduction.

Basing a team of top Australian researchers in the Caribbean, would gain critical knowledge for mitigating the impacts of SCTLD in Australian waters.

As effective preparations for the threat of SCTLD will involve coordination across multiple portfolios, I have copied in both Commonwealth and Queensland Ministers for Agriculture and Transport.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Russell Reichelt AO FTSE

Interim Chair, Reef 2050 Independent Expert Panel

10 September 2023

CC Senator the Hon Murray Watt, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

The Hon Catherine King MP, Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government

The Hon Mark Furner MP, Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and Minister for Rural Communities

The Hon Mark Bailey MP, Minister for Transport and Main Roads and Minister for Digital Services

Senator Nita Green, Special Envoy for the Great Barrier Reef