



# 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,

This letter is to convey the views and advice of the Reef 2050 Advisory Committee (RAC) to assist Ministerial consideration of future priorities and areas of focus for action and investment in the Great Barrier Reef.

The RAC is one of the two advisory bodies for the Long-Term Sustainability Plan for the Reef (Reef 2050 Plan), established to provide advice to the Australian and Queensland governments on reef policy and management. The members of the RAC, representing 19 organisations and sectors, consider it important that the views of Reef stakeholders be taken into account in conjunction with advice recently provided to you by its fellow Advisory body, the Independent Expert Panel (IEP).

The IEP's advice responded to a request from Minister Plibersek, on 24 October, 2022 that it provide advice about what is known about the impacts of climate change across the entirety of the Great Barrier Reef and any knowledge gaps that need to be addressed. To assist the IEP, the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water engaged the Australian Academy of Science (AAS) which convened three roundtable discussions between March and May, 2023 and produced a Reef Futures Roundtables Report (the AAS Report), published 3 August, 2023. A draft of the report, delivered to the IEP in June to assist the formulation of its advice to Ministers, was shared with RAC members. The Academy was not commissioned to provide policy recommendations, but instead offered a series of 'Observations' and 'Opportunities'.

At its most recent meeting, held on Green Island and in Cairns on 18 and 19 July, 2023, the RAC discussed the roundtable process and the AAS report. The Committee agreed it should also provide advice to Ministers to inform future policy, management and investment decisions. In developing the views and advice presented in this letter, the Committee judged it important to take account of several other key documents addressing priorities for action, including the Revised Reef 2050 Plan, released in December, 2021, the recommendations of the Report of the UNESCO Reactive Monitoring Mission (RMM) to the GBR, released in March, 2022 and the Reef 2050 Traditional Owner Implementation Plan, released in November, 2022.

Whilst recognising the importance of evaluation and value of bringing 'fresh eyes' to examine the challenges confronting the reef, as well as the thoughtful effort committed to presenting the AAS Report, from a practical viewpoint, RAC members thought the RMM Report was a more useful document for identifying priorities for action. The Committee noted that, while it had formulated some possible opportunities, the AAS Report had not identified any major knowledge gaps, giving confidence in the actions already being taken and what is being delivered. There was some concern that the roundtable process has caused a loss of momentum in delivery, and it is important now to regain momentum and recapture the sense



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of urgency to take action. The possibility of ocean heatwaves and further bleaching events in the coming summer months should be another spur to action.

RAC members commented that the roundtable discussions showed an insufficient appreciation of the extent and breadth of work underway and of the success and value of existing plans and programs. Decisions about where to target future action and expenditure should take full account of these and build on recognised successes.

The Committee noted concerns expressed by Traditional Owner participants and observers of the roundtables, that there had been a lack of awareness and understanding from non-indigenous participants about traditional knowledge systems.

The following summarises key advice from the RAC for your consideration:

## **1. The Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan (Reef 2050 Plan) remains the right framework and momentum must be maintained.**

In the view of the Committee, the Reef 2050 Plan remains the right framework for addressing threats to the Reef and for guiding Reef action in the future. The Reef 2050 Plan has been well served by its advisory arrangements through the Reef 2050 Advisory Committee and the Independent Expert Panel. These should remain the primary vehicle for the provision of stakeholder and independent scientific advice.

As a high level, strategic document, the Reef 2050 Plan is supported by a number of significant strategies, plans and programs at both a Commonwealth and State level, including but not limited to:

- Reef 2050 Water Quality Improvement Plan
- Reef 2050 Wetlands Strategy
- Reef 2050 Traditional Owner Implementation Plan
- Great Barrier Reef Blueprint for Climate Resilience and Adaptation (Blueprint 2030)
- Reef Joint Field Management Program
- Reef Restoration and Adaptation Program
- Reef 2050 Integrated Monitoring and Reporting Program
- Queensland Sustainable Fisheries Strategy
- Reef Guardian Council Program
- Crown-of-Thorns Starfish Control Program.

With such a broad program of work, alignment is critical, ensuring that these supporting strategies are 'joined at the hip' and well-integrated within the Reef 2050 framework. With reviews underway of the Reef 2050 Wetlands Strategy, the Blueprint 2030, and the Reef 2050 Water Quality Improvement Plan, and the five-yearly update of the Scientific Consensus Statement for the Great Barrier Reef due mid-2024, it is important these reviews ensure that opportunities for alignment and integration are realised to provide greatest outcome for the investment allocated. These reviews, and the next Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report, also due mid-2024, will inform the next revision of the Reef 2050 Plan, due in 2025.



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In addition to ensuring alignment between all relevant strategies, plans and programs, it is essential that momentum and continuity – including in staffing and relationships – is maintained where programs are delivering success. In particular, the Committee expressed concern that with less than 12 months remaining for the Great Barrier Reef Foundation – Reef Trust Partnership (RTP) funding, the majority of which comes to an end on 30 June, 2024, a pathway for transition of successful programs and projects into the Australian Government’s future funding has not been identified.

With more than 400 projects and 500 partners delivering strong on-ground outcomes for the Reef, all within the framework of the Reef 2050 Plan, RAC members consider it essential that the value of the strong partnership approach of the RTP be recognised and the momentum of its work maintained. This is particularly important for partners in regional Queensland that need funding confirmation in order to maintain their human resource capacity and capability to implement further work. Continuity of corporate knowledge is important in all agencies and continued funding is a key factor in staff retention.

The annual work plans of the RTP have been developed in close consultation with the RAC. The Committee has previously commended the Great Barrier Reef Foundation for its transparent approach and its work in delivering the Reef Trust Partnership funding, noting particularly that major achievements have been delivered in the water quality and Traditional Owner investment streams. A key focus for the UNESCO World Heritage Centre has been progress toward achieving the water quality targets by 2025 and it is critical that progress is accelerated to work toward this ambition. Water quality remains the key threat to the Reef after climate change.

## **2. A rolling, collaborative investment strategy is required.**

The Committee acknowledges that the funding provided by the Australian and Queensland Governments for reef protection is significant and has welcomed new commitments. At the same time, the RAC has been consistent in providing advice to Ministers, over the life of the Reef 2050 Plan, that funding remains a long way short of what is estimated as required to meet the targets, goals and objectives and implement fully the Reef 2050 Plan. The Committee has advocated over many years that current programs need to be expanded, scaled up and accelerated through the provision of additional funding as well as supporting the human resource capacity and capability in regional locations to deliver additional effort.

The provision of government funding through periodic multi-year arrangements has contributed to creating ‘funding cliffs’ which undermine certainty for delivery partners and communities and can lead to a loss of capacity in organisations reliant on project funding to retain staff. Ongoing base funding would allow certainty for long-term action and assist in building momentum for action. In addition, a rolling investment strategy would avoid funding being “locked in” to certain actions for many years and allow a more responsive and adaptive approach to Reef action. Future investment decisions will need to reflect the most up to date information and circumstances such as bleaching events or other climate-related impacts.



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The Committee notes there is a burgeoning economy of other funding sources including credit schemes for emissions reduction, blue carbon and Reef credits, the Nature Repair Market and Queensland Natural Capital Fund, the Land Restoration Fund and more. This investment diversification has the potential to ameliorate some of the challenges associated with limited-life government funding but requires that the rolling investment strategy be developed more collaboratively to ensure these multiple investment sources are coordinated.

### **3. Regional/place-based planning and engagement are important for delivering action at a relevant scale.**

The size of the Great Barrier Reef and its catchment area are of a scale that makes it difficult to set investment priorities and develop investment planning across the whole area. It is important that the Reef 2050 framework and investment priorities enable decision-making at an appropriate scale. A less top-down, more place-based approach is needed that takes account of regional differences, including delivery capacity, and allows the development of targeted action strategies.

To achieve regional ownership of these action strategies, strengthened engagement is needed across all sectors and relevant interest groups encompassing NRM organisations, local governments, Landcare and other community groups, Traditional Owners, landholders, agriculture and industry.

Regional approaches need to be holistic, whole-of-system, taking account of catchment water quality, estuaries and other wetlands and from the inshore to the outer Reef.

Considering the scale of the threats and challenges facing the Reef, and the future trajectories of change under different climate scenarios, hard choices and trade offs will be required. Community understanding and ownership of these challenges will be important, remaining cognizant that regional economic sustainability is part of maintaining regional capacity to implement Reef initiatives. Involvement of the RAC at the strategic level through to engagement with local partners will remain essential.

### **4. An accelerated program of landscape and ecosystem repair and restoration is needed to meet the 2025 Reef water quality targets.**

Modelling through the Paddock to Reef Program shows that in some catchments, practice change alone will be insufficient to meet the water quality targets. A regional landscape and ecosystem repair program will be needed. Appropriate investment in fine-scale monitoring could assist with identifying the optimal locations for system repair investments. The Committee acknowledged concern at the apparent contradiction between permitting further land clearing while also investing public funds in vegetation restoration and gully repair and urged that this situation be addressed. It should be noted, however, that an approach involving further restrictions on landholders is not supported by all members.



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## **5. Recognising the rights and interests of Reef Traditional Owners is an important aspect of the Reef 2050 Plan.**

The Committee has expressed appreciation for the work by Traditional Owners to develop the Reef 2050 Traditional Owner Implementation Plan and welcomed funding identified for its implementation. The Committee noted that integrating Indigenous knowledge systems has clear opportunities to enhance investment, policy and program design, and was a feature of the AAS roundtables. The Committee noted also its expectation that with the issue of Indigenous rights and interests being part of broader policies of change by both the Queensland and Australian Governments, more attention will be given to Traditional Owner contribution to delivery of the Reef 2050 Plan.

Traditional Owner members raised the concept of fees for Reef users to be provided to Traditional Owners. While underlining their readiness to explore opportunities to work with Traditional Owners, key Reef user representatives for tourism, commercial and recreational fishing noted that their industries already pay various fees, including for permits, licences and the Environment Management Charge and made clear their unwillingness to accommodate additional fees. Noting that the fees they pay are subsumed into consolidated revenue, it was suggested that this practice be reviewed, and that a discrete funding mechanism could be established, to fund reef actions, including building partnerships with communities and Traditional Owners for mutual benefit outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

Despite its diverse representation, and obvious differences of view between some stakeholders on some issues (e.g., previously, with regard to action on climate change and currently, on fisheries and approaches to addressing water quality i.e. regulatory vs voluntary), over the eight years of the RAC's operation, a genuinely collaborative spirit and shared resolve to work in partnership to protect the Reef has developed, linked to a steady growth in respect and understanding of each other's concerns and priorities. Continuity of representation and attendance at committee meetings has been an important part of this process, together with the level of representation, providing confidence that members are speaking with knowledge and authority for their organisations and sectors. While agreeing that this advice to you should be relatively strategic and high level, leaving individual stakeholders to provide more specific further advice relevant to their areas, the RAC is united in its views on many issues, namely:

- That the greatest threat to the Reef is from climate change and urgent action to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels is essential;
- That action to address water quality issues and reach the targets in the Reef 2050 Plan and associated Reef 2050 Water Quality Implementation Plan must remain a top priority for financial investment by both governments, noting that current levels of committed funding will not achieve the targets;
- That the Reef 2050 Plan is the appropriate framework for managing the Reef and its current advisory bodies should be maintained;
- That any future work plan should acknowledge the significant effort invested in development of the Reef 2050 Integrated Reporting and Monitoring Program



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(RIMREP) and the Reef Restoration and Monitoring Program (RRAP) and the gains to date and include action to bolster these;

- That recognition should also be given to the achievements of the Reef Trust Partnership (RTP) and urgent action taken to develop a transition program to address the issue of the rapidly approaching end date of RTP funding on 30 June, 2024 for a number of key programs, including the COTS Control Innovation Program, RIMREP and RRAP;
- That rather than the system of providing funding for fixed periods, a rolling investment strategy is needed, enabling reprioritisation or redirection of funds to suit changing circumstances;
- Transparency in reporting funding and outcomes achieved is needed to bolster trust and support for ongoing Reef programs;
- That delivery of large-scale projects relies on regional scale planning and engagement with local landholders, communities, and organisations; and
- That there is strong support for a greater focus on, support for and partnerships with Traditional Owners in the Reef space.

I would be pleased to meet you in person to provide additional comment on the work of the RAC and the views and advice presented in this letter. Additionally, RAC members are keen to continue engaging directly with Ministers and hope you may both be able to join the RAC at its next meeting, in Brisbane, on Tuesday 31 October, as well as attend the joint RAC-IEP dinner to be held the evening of Monday 30 October, following the IEP meeting that day.

Yours sincerely,

The Honourable Penelope Wensley AC,  
Chairman, Reef 2050 Advisory Committee