

GREAT BARRIER REEF MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Communiqué

12 August 2011

Commonwealth and Queensland ministers responsible for the Great Barrier Reef have renewed their commitment to work in partnership to tackle the major challenges facing the Reef.

The 34th meeting of the Great Barrier Reef Ministerial Council in Brisbane today, chaired by Australian Government Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Tony Burke, discussed a broad range of issues affecting the health of Reef and its catchments; from impacts on its ecology and habitats to the future of the many industries and communities it supports.

Queensland ministers attending were Vicky Darling, Minister for Environment, and the Minister for Tourism, Manufacturing and Small Business, Jan Jarratt.

Ministers represented by their departments were Australian Government Tourism Minister Martin Ferguson and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry; Senator Joe Ludwig; the Queensland Minister for Main Roads, Fisheries and Marine Infrastructure, Craig Wallace, and Tim Mulherin MP, Queensland Minister for Agriculture, Food and Regional Economies.

Ministers noted the health and resilience of the Reef. Ministers agreed on the importance of maintaining an holistic approach to management, highlighting development pressures, water quality and climate change as priorities for coordinated efforts.

Strategic coastal assessment

Ministers agreed to work together to implement a comprehensive strategic assessment of planned and potential coastal development affecting the Great Barrier Reef, in response to the increasing pressure of urban and industrial development on its coastal habitats. The assessment will aim to protect the environment, support more efficient and effective regulation of future coastal development, and meet Australia's international obligations to protect the World Heritage values of the Great Barrier Reef.

Reef Water Quality

The council endorsed the first report card on the implementation of the 2009 Reef Water Quality Protection Plan, which aims to reverse the decline in the quality of water entering the Reef from adjacent farming and grazing lands over five years to 2013. The plan is supported by around \$375 million in investment by the two governments.

The report card provides a comprehensive 2009 baseline to measure progress through subsequent reports from the *Paddock to Reef Water Quality Monitoring and Modelling Program*, in which the Queensland and Australian governments invest \$9 million annually.

Key achievements under the Reef Plan since 2009 include:

- Work by 625 graziers, 35 dairy farmers, and around 1350 cane, grain, cotton and horticulture growers with assistance through the Caring for Our Country Reef Rescue initiative to reduce nutrient, pesticide and soil run-off on their properties. Around 2000 kilometres of fencing has been erected to reduce erosion under the same initiative.
- The preparation by 319 cattle graziers and 565 canegrowers of Environmental Risk Management Plans, a requirement under new Queensland legislation.
- A requirement by canegrowers in North Queensland under Queensland legislation to calculate and apply no more than the optimum amount of fertilizer needed by their crop.
- New regulations to protect wetlands of high ecological significance and native vegetation adjacent to watercourses.

Ministers acknowledged the role of regional natural resource management bodies and agricultural industry groups in promoting land management practices that improve water quality outcomes. The technical support and training on best management practice provided through Reef Rescue and Reef Protection are assisting farmers to make informed decisions around sustainable farm management. This partnership approach is helping farmers help the Reef while also improving long term productivity and profits.

Dr Wendy Craik, Chair of the Partnership Committee—the key stakeholder advisory committee supporting the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan—discussed with the council the need for longer term directions for the Reef Plan, noting that it is scheduled for review in 2013.

Climate Change

Ministers noted that climate change is the single most significant threat to the Great Barrier Reef which, even under the most optimistic scenarios for greenhouse gas emissions reductions, will place significant pressure on the Reef. Ministers agreed to work together to help the Reef withstand and adapt to a changing climate, working on a framework for collaboration in research and monitoring, managing to maximise the resilience of the Reef, and supporting the adaptation of industries and communities.

Fishing

Noting that fishing is an important and legitimate use of the Great Barrier Reef, ministers recalled governments' response to the *Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report 2009*, which noted good practice in management of fishing, but also the need for further work. They agreed to a framework to ensure the two governments continue to work together to ensure best practice management of fishing in the Great Barrier Reef.

World Heritage Committee

Ministers received a report on the recent meeting of the World Heritage Committee, at which the Committee expressed concern about the approval of a Liquefied Natural Gas facility on Curtis Island near Gladstone. Ministers agreed to invite the Committee to visit the Great Barrier Reef, welcoming the opportunity to showcase the comprehensive efforts being taken by the two governments to ensure the wellbeing of the Great Barrier Reef is safe-guarded and its World Heritage values securely protected and proudly presented.

Cyclone Yasi and floods

Ministers noted assessments under the *Extreme Weather Response Program* initiated by the governments following the north Queensland floods and Cyclone Yasi and its findings that:

- The impacts of Cyclone Yasi extended over more than 300 kilometres, with 15 per cent of the total reef area of the World Heritage Area sustaining some coral damage, and six per cent severely damaged. Flood-related coral damage centered on the Keppel Bay region in central Queensland, where corals in shallower areas suffered the most.
- Seagrass loss has been extensive in areas between Cairns and Hervey Bay, due both to direct impacts from Cyclone Yasi, and extended periods of flooding. Loss of seagrass led to many dugong and green turtle deaths, which are expected to continue for several months.
- Coral damage in the tourism centres of Cairns, Port Douglas and the Whitsundays was very minor and reefs in these areas remain healthy and vibrant.

Tourism

Ministers emphasised that cyclones and floods have not downgraded the Reef as a tourism experience. The extraordinary biodiversity and world leading management by the governments continues to support the Reef's reputation as an iconic tourism destination.

Noting that that tourism remains the biggest industry supported by the Great Barrier Reef, generating around \$5 billion in income each year, they agreed to the development of a new Great Barrier Reef tourism marketing and development program by Tourism Queensland; and to the nomination of the Great Barrier Reef under the National Landscape Initiative.

Dugong and turtle protection

Ministers noted with concern the reports of increasing deaths and strandings of dugongs and marine turtles. Ministers discussed the work of the Dugong taskforce established by the governments in November 2010 to investigate matters related to the conservation of dugongs, which is also relevant to marine turtles.

Joint Field Management Program

Ministers noted that the joint field management program is a longstanding and important component of efforts by the two governments to protect the Reef. Ministers asked that future field management arrangements be considered in the context of the range of other programs and investments to protect the World Heritage Area.

Science

The importance of scientific and socio-economic research to protecting and managing the Reef was underscored. Ministers received a report on actions that have been taken since the last Ministerial Council meeting to ensure the significant investment in Reef-related research is targeted to achieve the best policy and management results.

Reef Guardians

Ministers noted that Australian Government funding of \$3.8 million has supported the strengthening of the Reef Guardian Schools and Reef Guardian Councils stewardship programs to ensure their longer term sustainability. It has also supported the initial development of stewardship programs for the farming and fishing industries, including initiation of pilot projects with groups of farmers and fishers to test and refine the approach.