



Reef 2050 Plan

INDEPENDENT EXPERT PANEL - MINUTES

Date: Friday, 16 April 2021, 9:30am – 2:40pm AEDT

Venue: Videoconference

ATTENDEES

Members

Prof Ian Chubb AC, Chair

Dr Andrew Ash

Dr Richard Brinkman

Prof Damien Burrows

Dr Romy Greiner

Prof Ove Hoegh-Guldberg

Prof Terry Hughes (*item 6 onwards*)

Prof Catherine Lovelock

Adj Assoc Prof Stephan Schnierer

Dr Britta Schaffelke

Dr Russell Reichelt

Dr Stuart Whitten

Ms Jane Waterhouse

Other attendees

Ms Deb Callister Assistant Secretary, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

Ms Rebekah Hamed Director, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

Dr Will Howard Assistant Director, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

Ms Emma De Smet Assistant Director, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

Ms Milica Milanja Secretariat, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

Ms Elisa Nichols Executive Director, Office of the Great Barrier Reef, Department of Environment and Science

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

Ms Margaret Johnson General Manager, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Dr David Wachenfeld Chief Scientist, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Dr Rachel Pears Assistant Director, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Ms Nyssa Henry Chief Scientific Officer, Department of Environment and Science (*items 7 & 8*)

Dr Roger Shaw Chair, Reef Water Quality Independent Science Panel (*items 7 & 8*)

APOLOGIES

Members

Prof Helene Marsh

Prof Kerrie Wilson

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 to the meeting.

The Chair noted apologies from Professor Helene Marsh and Professor Kerrie Wilson.

The Chair noted the main items of business on the agenda were to discuss planning for the 2022 Scientific Consensus Statement, provide advice on communication materials to support the release of the Reef 2050 Plan and discuss the recommendations following the independent review of Reef 2050 governance arrangements.

3. Conflict of Interest

Panel members did not declare any new or updated conflicts of interest at this meeting.

4. Panel Business

The Panel endorsed the minutes of Meeting 18, held on 18 November 2020, and noted progress with actions arising from previous meetings including:

- the Panel's advices to Ministers about coral composition and reassembly and explaining that the Reef is not a homogeneous entity, were finalised and provided to Ministers on 7 April 2021. They will be published on the Panel's page of the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment website shortly.
- the Panel agreed to address the outstanding action from meeting 16, to provide an explanation of how coral cover is measured and reported, as part of a broader discussion later this year. Members suggested this piece should also cover historical changes in coral growth rates.

During the members' only session held as part of this item, the Panel had a preliminary discussion about the recommendations following the independent review of Reef 2050 governance arrangements to be discussed further at item 10.

5. World Heritage Committee update

Ms Deb Callister provide the Panel with an update on World Heritage Committee (WHC) matters. The Panel noted that:

- the 44th WHC session will be held fully online and hosted by China, from 16–31 July 2021

- the Committee will consider the state of conservation of four Australian World Heritage properties at this meeting, including the Great Barrier Reef
- the Committee will consider Australia's 2019 State Party Report and the supplementary information that was provided to the World Heritage Centre in February this year
- Australia continues to be engaged in the review of the 2007 World Heritage Climate Change Policy
- the Committee will consider endorsement of the updated World Heritage Climate Change Policy at the 44th session.

6. State of the Reef

Dr David Wachenfeld provided the Panel with an update on the state of the Reef following the 2020/21 summer. The Panel noted that:

- this summer, conditions were relatively good for coral recovery
- there were four active cyclones in Queensland over the summer, but only one tracked across the Reef and it did not cause widespread damage
- there was no major or sustained flooding in or near the Reef, despite the influence of the La Nina climate driver that caused major flooding in 2011
- 2021 was warmer than average but did not cause as much coral heat stress as recent years
- GBRMPA's Reef snapshot for summer 2020-21 will be published soon; it will be followed by the Australian Institute of Marine Science Long Term Monitoring Program report to be published mid-2021.

The Panel discussed:

- products used by various agencies to detect water temperature and coral stress such as in-water thermal sensors and light stress technology
- the need for a chart showing the accumulation of heat that could be presented to Ministers and the public, noting that increased water temperatures will cause a shift in the biodiversity of the Reef, favouring a species mix that is more tolerant to heat.

The Panel noted:

- that NOAA produces a chart that shows accumulation of degree heating weeks and heat stress
- a GBRMPA pre-summer workshop is scheduled for November 2021.

7. Update from Reef Water Quality Independent Science Panel

Dr Roger Shaw and Ms Nyssa Henry joined the meeting.

Dr Shaw provided the Panel with an update from recent meetings of the Reef Water Quality Independent Science Panel (ISP), in particular the strategic planning meeting in November 2020.

The Panel noted that following the strategic planning meeting, the ISP principles of operation had been updated to better reflect ISP's role and to increase transparency around ISP processes.

The Panel supported the ISP recommendation to change the frequency of Reef Water Quality Report Cards to every two years. This would better allow project teams time to interpret trend analyses, address emerging issues, explain results and implications to stakeholders and develop proposals for improved monitoring, interpretation and reporting.

8. Scientific Consensus Statement 2022 development

Ms Nyssa Henry and Ms Jane Waterhouse provided the Panel with an overview of the planning process to date for the *2022 Scientific Consensus Statement on Land use impacts on Great Barrier Reef water quality and ecosystem condition (SCS)*.

The Panel sought clarification and provided comments on aspects of the process for the next SCS including:

- their concerns about the tight timeline for developing the SCS
- timing of engagement processes, including stakeholder consultation, synthesis workshops and end-user vetting
- the importance of strength of evidence and the need for transparency around the evidence base used to inform decisions, to ensure confidence in the SCS
- the need to consider the policy context when formulating key questions to ensure they can be used to assist with development of the next iteration of the Water Quality Improvement Plan.

The Panel discussed the definition of 'consensus' in the context of the SCS and suggested some modifications to the version developed by the ISP. The definition proposed by the Panel was:

“The Scientific Consensus Statement is a public statement on the scientific knowledge on land use impacts on Great Barrier Reef water quality and ecosystem condition, drawn from multiple lines of evidence. It is prepared by a diverse group of experts based on the strength of evidence. The consensus does not necessarily imply unanimity.”

The Panel noted this would be further refined and finalised by the ISP.

9. Reef 2050 Plan update and communications material

Ms Elisa Nichols provided the Panel with an update on progress with the Reef 2050 Plan. The Panel noted the changes made since public consultation, including:

- edits to reflect advice received through public consultation
- updates to make the text clearer and less bureaucratic
- integration of Indigenous Heritage Goals content throughout the Plan
- updates to strengthen the climate change section.

The Panel noted progress with communication material being developed to support release of the Plan, including:

- a complementary 'executive summary' version of the Plan is being developed to make content more accessible to a wider audience
- work underway to develop other stakeholder specific communication material.

The Panel provided advice on draft fact sheets developed to increase public understanding about what comprises the Reef and the broad elements of the Plan, including:

- some revision is needed to ensure the materials draw interest and help people to engage with the Plan
- the 'key work areas' would benefit from additional context and revised language to address some ambiguity
- communication materials should include acknowledgment that the Reef is changing and will be different in the future; it won't be returned to pristine
- stakeholder specific material needs to be written in a way that speaks to the particular groups and piques interest in the Plan.

10. Reef 2050 Governance Review

Ms Deb Callister provided the Panel with an overview of the *Independent Review of Reef 2050 Governance Final Report* and led discussion of relevant recommendations.

Members noted that the review had found the Panel to be effective, fit-for-purpose and well regarded. The Panel considered and provided comment on the recommendations to better enable the Panel to support implementation of the Reef 2050 Plan.

The Panel overall agreed with the Joint Team's proposed responses to the recommendations and noted that resulting amendments to governance documents, including Terms of Reference and Operating Protocols, would be made following consultation with the Chair and members.

11. Panel Business Continued

The Panel agreed that a communiqué would be finalised out-of-session and published on the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's website.

Members noted that a short Panel meeting will be scheduled (via videoconference) in the week commencing 17 May 2021 on the Reef Trust Partnership draft annual workplan for 2021/22. The workplan will be circulated to the Panel prior to this session.

The Panel discussed dates for subsequent Panel meetings, currently proposed for August and November 2021. Members noted that preferred timing would be determined via a scheduling poll.

The Panel provided comments on its draft forward workplan. Members agreed that their November 2021 meeting should include a half-day workshop dedicated to presentations and discussion of 'leading-edge science' on a range of topics (e.g. corals, oceans, vegetation). The Panel noted that

the program would be discussed and agreed out of session to ensure adequate time to finalise the agenda and line up presenters.

The Panel agreed to schedule presentations and discussions on the following items at a future meeting:

- contemporary climate projections led by the Bureau of Meteorology (as a follow up to a presentation by the Bureau at an earlier Panel meeting)
- ocean temperature observation and measurement, including measuring accumulated heat and the systems/predictive models/tools used to predict future bleaching events
 - the emphasis on temperature and degree heating weeks makes assumptions about what the corals are actually doing – the exposure of corals to heat is changing and that's not acknowledged in the models. Much more sophisticated models are needed to predict future bleaching events.

The Chair reminded members that his current term as Chair expires on 31 July 2021 and noted that an appointment decision would be made by the Australian and Queensland Environment ministers.

The Panel did not discuss any other business.

The meeting closed at 2.40pm.