

GREAT BARRIER REEF MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Communiqué

3 July 2009

A reinvigorated Great Barrier Reef Ministerial Council met for the first time since 2005 today in Brisbane.

The meeting was chaired by the Hon Peter Garrett AM, MP, Australian Government Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts. Other Ministers attending were:

- the Hon Martin Ferguson AM, MP, Australian Government Minister for Tourism
- the Hon Kate Jones MP, Queensland Government Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability
- Steve Wettenhall MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Tourism
- the Hon Tim Mulherin MP, Queensland Government Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries.

This was the first meeting of the Ministerial Council under the new *Great Barrier Reef Intergovernmental Agreement*, agreed by the Prime Minister and the Premier of Queensland in June 2009. The new Intergovernmental Agreement replaces the 1979 “Emerald Agreement”, recognising challenges not contemplated at that time. It provides the framework for a new era of cooperation between the governments to protect the globally significant Great Barrier Reef.

The new Agreement provides the Great Barrier Reef Ministerial Council with a clear charter to progress coordinated and complementary action by the Australian and Queensland governments to ensure the long term protection and ecologically sustainable use of the Great Barrier Reef.

The Ministers agreed that the Great Barrier Reef is in good health, a testament to its effective management. The Ministerial Council discussed some of the challenges that must be faced in maintaining the health of the Reef into the future and set in motion the first steps to achieving this, including agreement to:

- work together to build and maintain the resilience of the Reef to the impacts of climate change
- improve the quality of water entering the Reef through complementary and coordinated action
- continue to manage fishing activities in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area to ensure ecological sustainability and the protection of World Heritage values and
- maintain a complementary and joint program of field management for the marine and island national parks in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

Ministers acknowledged the significant economic contribution that tourism makes to the Great Barrier Reef region and the State’s economy and agreed that a more

proactive and strategic approach to environmental, social and economic issues was needed in the future. The impacts of tourism on the Reef need to be considered, as do the implications of the state of the Reef on the tourism industry. The continued sustainable growth of the tourism industry is heavily reliant on the ability to maintain and grow visitation levels, with the health of the Reef being critical to the on-going viability of the tourism sector. Ministers agreed that the governments should work together to ensure visitors are attracted to a healthy Reef system.

Climate Change

Climate change was identified as the single most significant threat to the Reef. Ministers noted that protecting the Reef against the impacts of climate change requires both global action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and local action to maximise the capacity of the Reef to withstand and adapt to the changing climate, notably by addressing key pressures on the Reef such as poor water quality. Ministers agreed that the governments will work together to build and maintain the resilience of the Reef to climate change, drawing on the existing *Great Barrier Reef Climate Change Action Plan*.

Reef Water Quality

Improving the quality of water flowing into the Reef from adjacent catchments is a priority for both governments. Ministers recognised that water flowing into the Reef continues to be of poor quality. Ministers agreed that it was important that the various actions being taken by both governments should be complementary and coordinated to ensure the water quality targets identified in the updated Reef Plan are achieved.

Coastal Development

Ministers noted the need for the governments to do more to manage the modification of important coastal habitat adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef through increasing development pressures. Ministers agreed that the governments should work together to identify opportunities for strategic assessments under the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* in relation to areas adjacent the Reef, as a means of improving environmental outcomes and reducing regulatory complexity. Ministers noted that consideration of strategic assessments is being driven through the Council of Australian Government's Business Regulation and Competition Working Group.

Fishing

Ministers noted that management of fishing in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is an issue that involves multiple Queensland and Australian government agencies. Ministers approved the development of an updated agreement between the governments on fishing in the World Heritage Area that clearly articulates the respective roles and responsibilities of the various agencies and promotes a collaborative approach to fishing-related policy, planning and management activities.

Research

Ministers highlighted the importance of scientific and socio-economic research in underpinning protection and management of the Reef. While it was recognised that prioritisation of research is already being undertaken by individual investors, the Ministerial Council agreed that the governments should investigate opportunities for improving coordination, sharing and communication of research across investors and governments.

Field Management

Ministers noted that the governments have long taken a joint approach to field management (i.e. “on ground” management) of marine and island national parks in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. The Ministerial Council confirmed the commitment of the governments to a joint approach and endorsed a new agreement to govern the joint field management program. Ministers requested that relevant agencies report to the next meeting of the Ministerial Council on field management priorities and resourcing needs in context of emerging issues such as climate change.

Protection of Dugong

Ministers were updated on recent measures put in place to protect dugong in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area as an outcome of changes to management arrangements for the East Coast Inshore Fin Fish Fishery.

Ministers noted that a Wildlife Conservation Plan for Dugong is being developed under the national *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, and that this will encompass consideration of measures to protect dugong applying in the Reef, including the need for additional action and opportunities for improved coordination between governments.