

TORRES STRAIT – SEA WALLS ISSUE

Issue

Torres Strait Island communities are seeking funding to construct sea walls and coastal erosion control measures costed at \$22 million to protect communities and critical infrastructure from encroaching seas.

Key Points

- The Department of Climate Change provided funding for the James Cook University to undertake research on the risks associated with erosion and inundation of the 6 most vulnerable islands in the Torres Strait. The researcher also worked with communities to come up with adaption options. the request for funding (\$22 million) has come from that.
- The next stage of the research is looking at the remaining islands – noting that the outcome of that research could well be a request for additional funding. The work is not expected to be completed until 2012. In May 2010 the Australian Government announced *additional funding* of \$1 million for tidal gauge monitoring in the Torres Strait and \$400,000 for further climate change adaptation research
- s22

Comment [y1]: Not sure that DCCEE funded the initial research?

All parties involved in administering the Major Infrastructure Program (MIP) - FaHCSIA, Queensland agencies, and TSRA - are unwilling to divert currently available funding for infrastructure in the Torres Strait into coastal protection works. MIP funding ceased on 30 June 2011 and further funding was not provided in the 2011 budget.

- FaHCSIA has noted a shift in policy approach for indigenous communities, moving to transfer responsibility for infrastructure and municipal services to state governments
- FAHCSIA advises that the Qld Govt has put aside \$8m for general infrastructure funding but without the matching funding coming from the Commonwealth there is some question whether this will be paid.
- The only other source of funding for are:
 - The Natural Disaster Resilience Program (NDRP) is a four year disaster mitigation and community resilience competitive grant program and is funded through shared contributions of the Australian Government, the Queensland Government, and eligible applicants.
 - In 2011-12 Queensland will be paid by the Commonwealth 23% of the total funding pool of \$25.7 million (thus \$5.9 million) with \$26.1 million available nationally in 2012-13. This funding is for all approved activities in the state and provides little scope to fund the seawall project proposed by TSRA.
 - Regional Development Australia Fund
 - RDA Far North Queensland and Torres Strait has advised that while the issue is high on their agenda, sea walls are not identified in the RDA's

Comment [y2]: Has been allocated to the state infrastructure program in the Torres Strait

2011-12 Regional Roadmap. Consequently, a proposal would not be likely to be eligible for consideration under the Regional Development Australia Funding (RDAF) Guidelines. The RDA is of the view that sea walls are expensive and not a sustainable response to the inundation problems in the longer term.

- The movement of funds from RDAF for this purpose would need to be discussed with the Independent members.
- Under the Australian Government's Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA), state governments may seek partial reimbursement for their expenditure on restoring essential public infrastructure following eligible natural disaster events.
 - In the case of the proposal to restore the sea walls in the Torres Strait, state costs are not eligible for reimbursement because the NDRRA is targeted to damage related to specific 'rapid onset' events. The degradation of the sea walls is considered to be a gradual process, and as such not attributable to the recent disaster event.

BACKGROUND

The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) representatives have noted in recent years that the Australian Government is investing very substantially through the overseas aid budget in the International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative (\$150 million announced in 2008 over 3 years, and a further \$178.2 million announced in 2010 over 2 years) to assist vulnerable countries in our region adapt to impacts of climate change that are similar to those in the Torres Strait.

Torres Strait Islands are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. There is a history of inundation problems and current inundation and erosion issues have been portrayed in the media as a climate change issue, although there has not been scientific work done to give evidence for this attribution.

Some of the Torres Strait islands have experienced significant coastal erosion, which is a function of a complex combination of wind, tide and wave action. Inundation of some Torres Strait islands is occurring twice a year with king tide events. The extent of inundation can be exacerbated if the king tide event is accompanied by compounding weather or sea conditions. (The region is not as prone to cyclone occurrence as other parts of Queensland, but serious damage to Torres Strait islands has occurred in the past.)

In the future, the projected magnitude of climate change driven sea level rise is very likely to seriously exacerbate the vulnerability to inundation and erosion. Indigenous communities, such as those in the Torres Strait, typically possess limited adaptive capacity, due to their socio economic circumstances and the remoteness of settlements.

Governance in the Torres Strait

The Queensland Government has jurisdictional responsibility for the Torres Strait islands.

However, the Commonwealth Government also has significant interests in the area, for example in relation to issues of border security, quarantine, and management of the Torres Strait Treaty with Papua New Guinea. The Torres Strait also has a high proportion of Indigenous population (80%), with FaHCSIA having a strong portfolio interest and involvement on Indigenous issues.

There are three principal regional governance bodies in the Torres Strait, the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA), the Torres Strait Island Regional Council and the Torres Shire Council. These three bodies also work closely with the neighbouring Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council (NPARC) on matters affecting the two mainland Torres Strait island communities (Bamaga and Seisia) on Cape York.

The Torres Strait Island Regional Council is the local government body set up under Queensland legislation for nearly all of the outlying Torres Strait communities, with the exception of Thursday, Horn, and Prince of Wales Islands (which come within the boundaries of the Torres Shire Council) and Bamaga and Seisia (which fall within the NPARC).

Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA)

The TSRA is a Commonwealth statutory authority under the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act 2005 \(ATSIA Act\)](#) and is within the FaHCSIA portfolio. The TSRA has responsibility for formulating, coordinating and implementing programs for Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people living within the region. It is the peak Commonwealth representative body for Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people living in the Torres Strait. The TSRA Board consists of local community councillors representing these island communities.

Comment [y3]: Plus some directly elected representatives

Through the TSRA, FaHCSIA co-funds the *Major Infrastructure Program* (MIP) for the Torres Strait on a 50/50 basis with the Qld Government. This funding is used for the provision of health and environmental capital infrastructure, such as sewerage and water supply, which would normally be the responsibility of local government. There have been four funding rounds of the MIP since 1998. The current (fourth) round of the MIP has two years of funding remaining and all funds have been prioritised. In April 2009, Minister Macklin announced the provision of an additional Australian Government contribution of \$28m, matching the Queensland Government's contribution for the last two years of round four of the MIP.

Comment [y4]: No, funding has finished, although some projects have yet to be completed and funds have been carried over for this purpose

s22

All parties involved in administering the Major Infrastructure Program (FaHCSIA, Queensland agencies, and TSRA) are unwilling to divert currently available funding for infrastructure in the Torres Strait into coastal protection works – the TSRA seeks additional funding.

Comment [y5]: There is no currently available funding. All funds are already allocated to specific projects.

Carryover projects funded under The current MIP⁴ will terminate in 2011-2012 be completed by the end of 2012 (check) and, at present, there is no commitment to any further funding. Total funding provided by the Commonwealth is \$29 million over three years.

Comment [y6]: More like \$56m over four years

FaHCSIA has noted a shift in policy approach, moving to transfer responsibility for delivery of infrastructure and municipal services for remote indigenous communities to state governments.

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT SUPPORT TO TORRES STRAIT

General

Since 1999, under joint Commonwealth/ Qld Government funding arrangements, the Commonwealth has provided around \$100m to the TSRA for health and environmental infrastructure spending under the MIP program

The International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative is funded through the overseas aid program and can only be deployed in developing countries. Hence, sea level work in the Torres Strait is funded through domestic programs.

The two councils are in receipt of Financial Assistance Grants totalling \$10.1 million in 2010-11. FAGs improve councils' capacity to provide their communities with an equitable levels of services. They are untied in the hands of local government, allowing councils to spend the grants according to local priorities

Funding of \$160,000 was also approved for each of the councils under the Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program.

Specific Funding For Rising Sea Levels

In May 2010 the Australian Government announced additional funding of \$1 million for tidal gauge monitoring in the Torres Strait and \$400,000 for climate change adaptation research

- The tidal gauge monitoring initiative will provide key information to assess tidal variation, potential sea level rise and to support planning decisions, including planning to withstand the impacts of rising sea levels in an area that is characterised by particularly complex ocean behaviour.
- The \$400,000 research initiative being undertaken by James Cook University is funding important research on coastal erosion, inundation impacts and adaptation options in the Torres Strait. This project was developed with the close involvement and support of the Torres Strait Regional Authority and the adaptation options are being identified, assessed and ranked in close consultation with the Torres Strait communities affected. This research follows an earlier Commonwealth funded project which undertook the same assessment and development of adaptation options for four of the six most vulnerable islands in Torres Strait (Warraber, Masig, Iama, Porumera). The new project will cover the remaining 13 inhabited Torres Strait islands.

The original project was used as a basis by the TSRA to then develop costings for the implementation of the works identified as a response to the threats of coastal erosion and inundation. The budget is \$22m

The kinds of works which were identified and costed for the six most vulnerable islands are

- Seawall construction and upgrade (most costly **option**)
- Raising of essential infrastructure (sewerage and water)
- Dredging, sand relocation, and beach replenishment

Comment [y7]: This seems to assume the categories of works are options. I don't think that is the case. I think the location determines what work is most appropriate

- Work on levee walls.

These works are included in the Action Plan of the *Torres Strait Climate Change Strategy 2010-2013*

Under the James Cook University project, the proposed cost/benefit analysis on the highly vulnerable islands of Saibai and Boigu is likely to include identification of

- costs of fortifying (using enclosing walls where needed) and increasing elevation (using sand) over the village footprint
- costs of building equivalent infrastructure elsewhere and/or relocating communities.

Like under the first project, it is likely that when consulted under this project, the thirteen island communities involved will be opposed to movement off their islands as an adaptation option, except as a *last resort*.

The project manager, Dr Kevin Parnell, JCU, advised the Department of Climate Change that the project is proceeding to timeframe and is on track to complete the inundation mapping and risk assessment of infrastructure by June 2012. The development of specific adaptation options, to be undertaken in close co-operation with communities, is not scheduled for completion until June 2013. The longer timeframe for this latter component of the project largely reflects the challenges of implementing a consultation process in remote communities.

The Final Report (due 30 May 2012) will provide data and analysis to help decision makers to assess the viability of a range of adaptation options to address the challenges of erosion and coastal inundation, including the cost effectiveness of specific adaptation measures, and for the case of Boigu and Saibai, a preliminary analysis of the relative costs of the community 'staying or moving'. Specific deliverables will include

- An inventory of threatened infrastructure
- Identification and assessment of adaptation options for each of the island communities
- Documentation of community views on different adaptation options.

Other Funding Sources

RDAF

The two local government councils in Torres Strait are eligible for to apply for infrastructure funding under the Regional Development Australia Fund. However, the TSRA is unlikely to be eligible to apply under the program.

RDAF has been reviewed following Round 1 and the program guidelines are being reviewed.

Under the RDAF guidelines for Round 1, to be eligible for funding, projects were required to be aligned with the RDA plan in their regions. There is every likelihood this will be a requirement in future rounds.

RDA Far North Queensland and Torres Strait has advised that while the issue is high on their agenda, sea walls are not identified in the RDA's 2011-12 Regional Roadmap. On this basis, it is unlikely the project would be unlikely to be eligible for funding under RDAF.

- The RDA has talked with Phillip Mills the CEO of the Torres Strait Shire Council about prospective RDAF projects. These are around other issues such as bio-security and the airport.
- There are three members of the RDA Committee who live in the Torres Strait: The Deputy Chair, Elizah Wasaga, the Treasurer, Annie Stone, and Napsia Bin Tahal (Deputy Mayor TS Shire Council).

RDAF is a highly competitive program. Under Round 1 there were well over 500 applications of which 37 were successful. All applications will need to meet the eligibility criteria prior to consideration for funding prioritisation by the RDAF Advisory Panel. Applicants seeking the level of funding likely to be sought for the sea walls project will most likely need to be able to make at least a 50% contribution to the project.

The Torres Strait Councils should approach RDA Far North Queensland and Torres Strait – the Chair, ^{s11C}, can be contacted through the RDA office by phoning ^{s11C}

Natural Disaster Resilience Program

The Natural Disaster Resilience Program (NDRP) is a four year disaster mitigation and community resilience competitive grant program and is funded through shared contributions of the Australian Government, the Queensland Government, and eligible applicants.

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