

TORRES STRAIT TIDAL INUNDATION

BACKGROUND (as at 2 March 2012)

- Some Torres Strait islands have been badly affected by tidal inundation in recent times. In particular, the outer islands of Boigu (population according to 2006 Census: 283), Saibai (337), Warraber (247), Iama (311), Poruma (166) and Masig (300) have been affected. The attachment to land is such that there is a reluctance to relocate, but significant expenditure will be required to protect infrastructure on affected islands (approximately \$22 million has been cited). The inner islands are not as threatened as some, but do suffer inundation from time to time.
- Regional representatives have criticised the lack of resources allocated to climate change infrastructure and adaptation in the Torres Strait region and compared it with the significant funding (approximately \$328 million over five years) to Pacific neighbours dealing with the same issues.
- On 11 July 2011, the Torres Strait Island Regional Council (TSIRC) wrote to the Prime Minister regarding the impacts of climate change in the Torres Strait.
- On 25 July 2011, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet responded to the TSIRC noting their concerns and advising that they had been referred to the Minister for Climate Change and Energy Efficiency.
- On 20 September 2011, the Minister for Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, the Hon Greg Combet MP wrote to the TSIRC noting that the Australian Government was aware of the problem of coastal erosion and inundation facing Torres Strait Island communities, and outlined the funding provided in May 2010. The letter noted the House of Representative's support for the Hon Warren Entsch MP's private member's motion on flooding in the Torres Strait (see below). However, it stated that the funding of coastal protection works was primarily the responsibility of the Queensland Government.

Entsch's Private Member's Motion

- On 18 August 2011, the House of Representatives considered a private Member's motion submitted by the Hon Warren Entsch MP, on flooding of communities in the Torres Strait. In particular, the motion states 'in light of the evidence of continued flooding on the outer islands due to king tidal surges, calls on the Government to commit to restore and rebuild the damaged sea walls on the outer islands of the Torres Strait to protect the island communities from further devastation'. The House of Representatives supported this motion, acknowledging the problems confronting Torres Strait communities. The motion raised expectations in the region that funding would be forthcoming.
- On 13 September 2011, the Hon Warren Entsch MP wrote to the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, the Hon Simon Crean MP requesting a projected timetable for repairing and rebuilding the sea walls. In November 2011, the Hon Warren Entsch MP received a reply from Minister Crean advising that the sea walls were the responsibility of the local council and the Queensland Government. On 30 November 2011, the Hon Warren Entsch MP wrote to Minister Crean expressing his disappointment with the response. (*Koori Mail*, 14 Dec 2011, p.15; *Torres News* on 14-20 December 2011, p.9).

Recent Media

- On 2 March 2012, it was commented that 'climate projections suggest six low-lying islands will only get worse and the people fear that secret plans are being made to abandon the islands.' The Minister for Regional Development, Regional Australia and Local Government, the Hon Simon Crean MP said in a statement that some money may be available later this year. A spokesperson for Minister Crean said that he is unaware of any relocation plans (*ABC AM, 2 March 2012*).
- Member for Leichardt, the Hon Warren Entsch MP has recently been critical, stating that the inundation problems facing Torres Strait communities could have been avoided and that if sea walls were not built soon, many Torres Strait Islanders would be forced to evacuate their communities (*Torres News, 1-7 Feb 2012, p.7*).
- Torres Strait Island Regional Council member (TSIRC), Councillor Ron Enosa has also expressed concern that increasingly high tides could spark a malaria outbreak. In response, Queensland Health has stated that while the malaria risk is extremely low, it would continue to monitor the situation. The Minister for Regional Development, Regional Australia and Local Government, the Hon Simon Crean MP said the Government was exploring all options. (*ABC News, 18 Jan 2012, Torres News, 25-31 Jan 2012*).
- On 16 January 2012, Dr Donna Green, climate scientist at the University of New South Wales spoke on *ABC Radio Australia* about the impact of king tides and rising sea levels on the infrastructure of some of the islands in the Torres Strait region. A spokesperson from the office of the Minister of Regional Development, Regional Australia and Local Government said some Commonwealth funding may be available soon.

Funding

- In December 2009, TSRA announced that approximately \$22 million in funding was required for urgent mitigation works in the Torres Strait region.
- On 5 May 2010, the Commonwealth Government provided \$1 million for tidal gauges to monitor sea levels on the most affected islands to gather data to support future planning. The funding was provided by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA). These gauges will monitor mean sea levels on at least four islands and will provide key information to assess tidal variation, potential sea level rise and to support planning decisions.
- On 5 May 2010, the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency provided \$400,000 for new research into the impacts of coastal erosion and inundation in the Torres Strait communities and for the identification and development of adaptation strategies by Torres Strait communities. This will build on previous research commissioned by TSRA and undertaken by James Cook University.

Regional Development Australia Fund

- In December 2011, the TSIRC applied for \$5 million under Round Two of the Regional Development Australia Fund to upgrade seawalls on the islands of Boigu and Saibai. On 11 January 2012, it was announced that the proposal had cleared the first stage of

the approval process and had been shortlisted to one of three projects in Far North Queensland. Approved applications will be announced in May 2012.

- The Regional Development Australia Fund is designed to fund priority infrastructure projects identified by local communities in regional Australia that include economic and community infrastructure projects. Round Two of this fund is valued at \$200 million, and applications are open to local government and not for profit organisations.

Infrastructure funding

- The Major Infrastructure Program (MIP) has been jointly funded by the Commonwealth and Queensland since 1998, and has delivered a range of environmental health related infrastructure projects throughout the region, but has not to date covered coastal protection works. MIP Stage 4 funding concluded in 2010-2011. Queensland continued to provide assistance for infrastructure, at a reduced level.

Pacific Island funding

- For the worst-affected islands in the Torres Strait, the problems are similar to those experienced in parts of the Pacific. Australia is providing approximately \$328 million over five years to meet high priority climate adaptation needs in vulnerable countries. Much of this effort is in the Asia Pacific region, with assistance being extended to the Caribbean and Africa and for additional initiatives in the Mekong region. None of this assistance applies to the Torres Strait. The only climate change-specific assistance the region has received is as set out in the response above.
- In a media release by the Prime Minister on 8 September 2011, it stated that Pacific Island countries are among the most vulnerable to climate change and that 'it is important that Australia help its smaller neighbours deal with the effects that climate change will have on their islands.'
- The Hon Peter Garrett AM, MP, then Minister for the Environment, in response to media coverage of perceived anomalies in the Australian Government response to climate change in the Torres Strait compared with aid to Pacific countries, said in December 2009 that the Government would consider the request for around \$22 million for remediation and mitigation works in the region but subsequent funding bids have been unsuccessful.

House of Representatives' Standing Committee Inquiry

- In October 2009, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts Inquiry report: *Managing our Coastal Zone in a Changing Climate: the time to act is now* was tabled. Recommendations 17 and 18 of this report relate to the Torres Strait region.
- Recommendation 17: *The Committee recommends that the Department of Climate Change, in collaboration with the Queensland Government, CSIRO and Indigenous communities in the Torres Strait, undertake a major study into the vulnerability of the Torres Strait to the impacts of climate change and provide assistance in the development of an adaptation plan.*
- Recommendation 18: *The Committee recommends that the Australian Government give the five recommendations calling for information, studies and data, as proposed*

by the Torres Strait Regional Authority, early and urgent consideration with a view to their implementation.

- On 23 November 2010, the Government tabled its response to the above report, and acknowledged the seriousness of inundation and climate change facing Torres Strait communities. The response agreed to Recommendation 17 and agreed-in principle to Recommendation 18.

Relevant Reports

- On 5 May 2010, the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency released the report *Risks from Climate Change to Indigenous Communities in the Tropical North of Australia*, which noted that climate change will have a significant impact on Indigenous communities in the far north of Australia. Saibai Island in the Torres Strait region is one of eight case studies listed in this report.
- In May 2010, the Torres Strait Regional Authority released their *Torres Strait Climate Change Strategy (2010-2013)*, which identifies the need for upgrades to sea walls on specific islands to address flooding issues.
- In December 2010, the CSIRO released the report - *Observed and Future Climates of the Torres Strait Region*, which noted that climate change in the Torres Strait region is inevitable, and that significant adaptation to a changing climate will be required. In particular, it states that increases in sea level due to climate change are expected to pose the greatest threat to the wellbeing and viability of low lying island communities. The report recommends that climate impacts and adaptation assessments should be improved by further development of versatile climate impacts and adaption models and methodologies for a number of key sectors and activities.
- In 2011, the Queensland Government's Office of Climate Change released the Issues paper: *Climate Change: Adaptation for Queensland*, which states that the islands in the Torres Strait are particularly vulnerable to sea level rise from climate change. The issues paper notes that there are limited resources available to the Torres Strait region to protect against future sea level rise and related climate change impacts; and that 'there is a need to work with these vulnerable communities to determine a longer term strategy for managing risks associated with sea level rise.'