WETLANDS REPORT HIGHLIGHTS DECADE OF INACTION

A snapshot report into the management of Australia’s Ramsar wetlands up to the end of 2007 paints a damning picture of poor administration and inaction under the previous government, Environment Minister Peter Garrett said today.

The *Ramsar Snapshot Study Report* looks at the status and management of all 65 Australian Ramsar sites and assesses the completeness and currency of Ramsar site documentation for Australian Ramsar sites.

“This study shows just how much the Howard Government and Malcolm Turnbull as environment minister took their eye off the ball when it came to the management and protection of our internationally recognised wetlands, including the Coorong. It is a damning indictment of their failure to act in the face of drought and dangerous climate change.

“Page after page highlights the serious ecological and management issues and challenges regarding Australia’s Ramsar Convention administration, the failures of the past and suggests a number of areas where implementation of the Ramsar Convention in Australia can be improved.

“The Rudd Labor Government has already responded with a $400,000 Rolling Review program under development for Australia’s Ramsar Estate while more than $10 million has been committed in total towards wetlands projects in 2008-2009 through the *Caring for our Country* initiative.

“Around the country sixteen Open Grants projects worth $3,642,882 and 76 Community Coastcare projects totalling $6,595,773 have already benefited from these funds with Ramsar wetlands a priority area for funding under the $2.25 billion *Caring for our Country* program.”

Mr Garrett said since accepting the report in January 2008 the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts had been working with states and territories through the Wetlands and Waterbirds Taskforce to implement actions to respond to the report’s recommendations. Most Ramsar sites are managed by state and territory governments, while the Commonwealth’s principal role is in coordination, management funding and liaison with the Ramsar Secretariat.

For example, under the Ramsar Management Planning Program, the Australian Government is providing more than $4.5 million over 4 years to develop and update Ramsar site documentation including management plans, ecological character descriptions and Ramsar Information Sheets.

Mr Garrett said water management and use is a key threat to a number of Ramsar sites and as part of the $12.9 billion, 10 year *Water for the Future* plan, the Australian Government is purchasing water entitlements from willing sellers to return water to the environment. Funding has also been provided to The Living Murray initiative, to provide increased environmental flows and complementary on-ground works and measures to six icon sites, which include six Ramsar sites along the River Murray.

“Unlike the previous government, who were prepared to bury their heads in the sand when it came to dealing with these issues, I welcome this report as a basis upon which this Government can act to meet its commitment to strengthen the protection of important wetlands and to meet our obligations as a Party to the Ramsar Convention.
“Significant challenges remain ahead of us in managing our wetlands especially in the context of climate change and drought. But used in concert with the significant investment that the Government is already making to restore the health of our rivers and waterways, the recommendations of the Ramsar Snapshot Study Final Report will help build a more focused and effective approach to the conservation and management of Australia’s internationally significant wetlands.”

The Snapshot Report is accompanied by a response to the main findings and recommendations from the Wetlands and Waterbirds Taskforce (WWTF). The WWTF comprises members from Australian, state and territory government agencies responsible for wetland management and is one of a number of advisory committees that report to the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council.

World Wetlands Day is celebrated each year on 2 February to mark the anniversary of the signing of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention) in Ramsar, Iran, 1971.

Australia was one of the first countries to sign the Ramsar Convention and designated the world’s first Wetland of International Importance, Cobourg Peninsula Aboriginal Land and Wildlife Sanctuary in the Northern Territory, in 1974. Australia has 65 Wetlands of International Importance, covering approximately 7.5 million hectares.


Further information on wetlands and World Wetlands Day go to: http://www.environment.gov.au/water/environmental/wetlands

Further information on the Caring for our Country Program go to: http://www.nrm.gov.au/


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