

AGREEMENT ON BARRIER REEF CIL DRILLING ENQUIRY

The Prime Minister said he was delighted with the outcome of the conference with the Premier of Queensland.

Agreement had been reached that there should be an enquiry into the possible damage which might be caused to the Barrier Reef through drilling for oil. The enquiry was to be an open enquiry with sufficient authority to collect any evidence required. All interested parties could appear before the Committee and state their views, and adduce evidence to support those views.

The Committee of enquiry was to be not less than three nor more than five. It was to consist of a Judge as Chairman and representatives of marine biologists and petroleum engineers. The committee was to be jointly agreed by the Commonwealth and the State Governments and was to report to both Governments. The terms of reference of the Committee were :-

1. Taking into account existing world technology in relation to drilling, and safety precautions relating thereto, what dangers are there of an oil or gas leak in exploratory and production drilling in the area of the Great Barrier Reef.
2. The probability of benefits accruing to the State of Queensland and other parts of the Commonwealth from exploration or drilling for petroleum in the vicinity of the Reef and the extent of the benefits thereby rendered probable.
3. What are the existing safety precautions already prescribed or otherwise laid down, and, if exploration or drilling for petroleum on or near the Reef is permitted, what conditions should be imposed before such drilling could take place.
4. What would be the likely effect of an oil or gas leak and subsequent remedial measures on -
  - (a) the coral reefs themselves
  - (b) the coastline
  - (c) the ecological and biological aspects of life of the area
5. Whether there are areas, and if so where, where an oil leak, if it occurred, would cause no damage to the Reefs or ecological and biological aspects of the Reefs.

6. The area of the Great Barrier Reef referred to in the above terms of reference includes the entire area from low water mark on the mainland of Queensland to the outer line of the Reefs and includes also the area outside and adjacent to the outer line of Reefs.

The question of the possibility of drilling during the holding of the enquiry was considered.

As regards drilling in Repulse Bay, the Queensland Government stated that it did not feel it could repudiate its contractual obligations should Ampol/Japex insist on drilling. But both Governments expressed the hope that Ampol/Japex would inform the Queensland Government that they did not propose to drill pending the outcome of the enquiry.

In regard to other areas of the Barrier Reef, both Governments expressed the hope and the desire that drilling should not take place pending the outcome of the enquiry and the Commonwealth stated that if the wish of the Governments concerned should be ignored, the conditions attached to drilling should be so stringent that no damage could occur.

It was further agreed if, as a result of any action taken because of the report of the Committee, the question of compensation should arise, both Governments would at once confer on this matter.

On the question of the depredations of the Crown of Thorns Starfish both Governments agreed that a Joint Committee should be set up financed by a dollar for dollar grant from the State and Commonwealth Governments.

It was noted that much investigation into this problem had already taken place but that no definitive proposals for action had so far been able to be recommended by the bodies concerned in investigation.

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CANBERRA  
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